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BY
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SMASHING NOVEL
by
ORRIN HOLLMER

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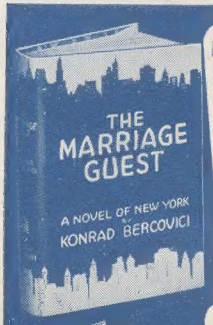

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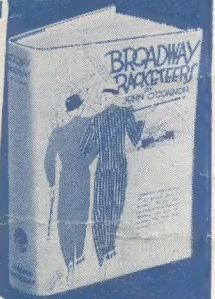

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They called him "One-Gun" Nelson, because he could cause more slaughter with his one six-shooter, than any other man in Arizona could cause with two guns, that is, if the other man was facing the blazing eyes and the blazing guns of "One-Gun" Nelson. More than one man found out to his extreme regret that this six-foot cyclone of blazing action was not a man to be crossed. And Mat Nelson rode the straight and narrow trail of the law-abiding into the maws of as vicious a gang of land grabbers and dry-gulchers as ever terrorized Arizona. And even against tremendous odds he proved that there was nothing of the bushwhacker in the Nelson make-up.

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A fellow is apt to slip a little when he's young, and ride the owl-hoot trail for a while, but if the law has nothing against him, it's pretty much all right for him to change his brand, and ride straight in another part of the country. And no one can blame him for demanding a trigger showdown with a low coyote who'd sell out his buddies, and try to force a young waddie back into the owl-hoot trail, while the swellest girl in the world is waiting for him to make good.

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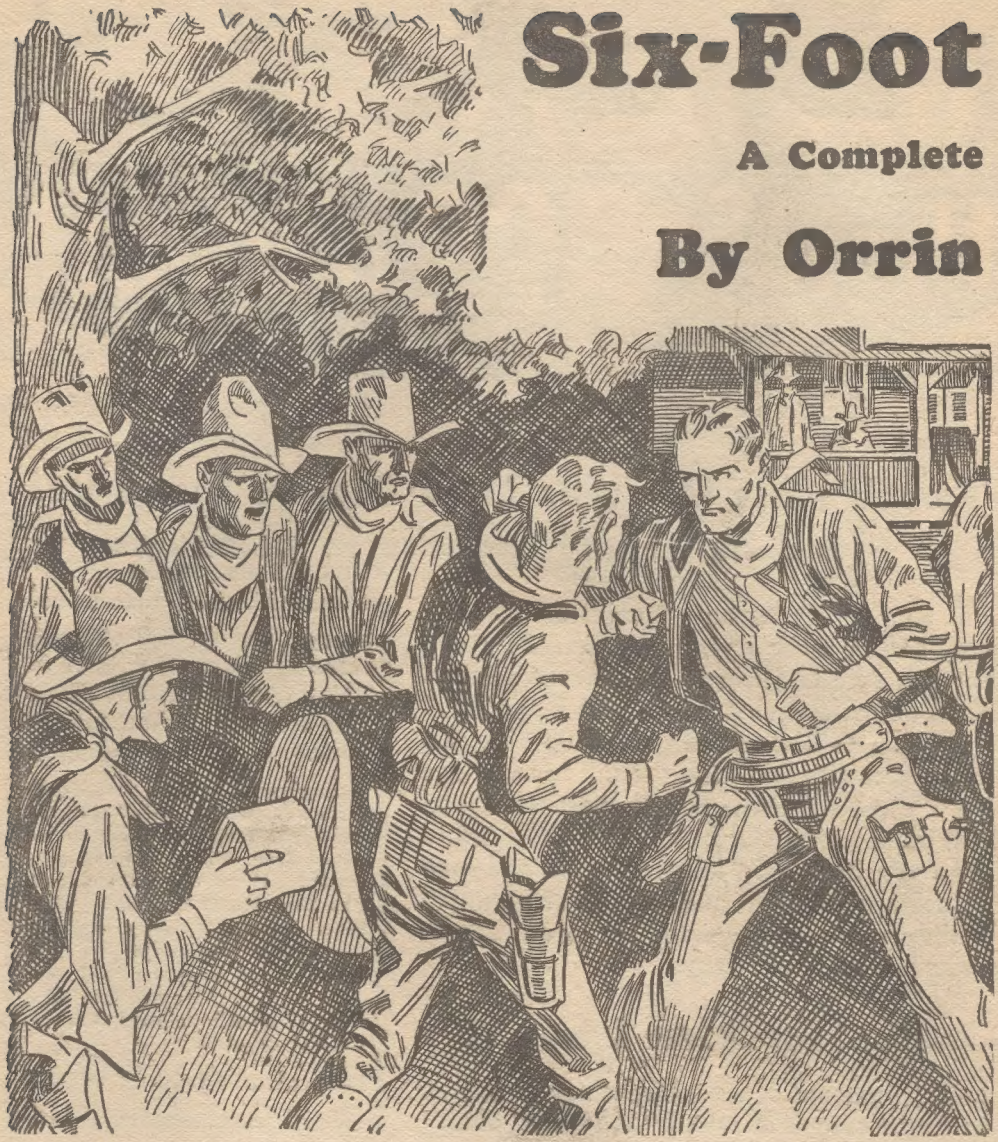

CHAPTER I

"SO this is Paris!"

The speaker was Mat Nelson. The audience was Silver Dollar, his horse. And of course it wasn't Paris at all.

While Silver Dollar wandered about, sniffing the air, Mat scratched his head in perplexity, and disdainfully studied the landscape.

To the east and west, through a seemingly endless expanse of parched desert, stretched a single track of iron rails and wooden ties, the latter scarcely visible in spots on account of layers of dust and sun-baked clay. Northward lay a repetition of the scene, without the rails and ties—a waste of hot, forlorn desert. And southward was the same picture, as if reflected in a mirror, except that about a mile from the tracks a range of low foothills gradually climbed toward a jagged mountain all but lost in the purple distances.

A few feet to the side of the rails stood a six-foot post, prematurely aged by desert suns and looking older than Mat Nelson, if hardly as tall. At the upper extremity was nailed a cross-board bearing the unmistakable inscription: SPRING GREEN.

"So this is Paris!" he repeated. "Waal,

Cyclone

75,000 Word Novel

Hollmer

Refusing to draw his gun and invite sudden death, Plug Keffer resorted to fisticuffs which resulted almost as disastrously for him.

ef it ain't, I reckon it looks as much like it as it does like a place thet's christened Spring Green! Didja git thet, Silver, ol' hoss? Spring Green! I don't see no green, an' I shore don't see no spring."

Silver Dollar made no reply, of course. He was a highly-accomplished quadruped, but human speech had never been added to his education. It was apparent, however, that he had heard his master and possibly even had understood the drift of his remarks. He switched his tail, and turned his head dreamily over the long trail, paralleling the railroad, over which he had come.

"Nope, it ain't much of a place," Mat admitted, as if the animal had remarked to that effect. "I don't wonder yore ol' ears are a-flappin' back plumb disappointed-like. Le' me see."

The puncher drew a much-worn envelope from his pocket, and extracted a frayed letter. It was from one Samuel Halliday, his dead mother's brother, a long-winded gentleman who wrote a letter perhaps as often as once every three years. And much can happen in three years, even in such a sparse community as Spring Green. Samuel Halliday seemed to have told everything that had occurred during such a period. He

was an important resident of Spring Green, and entirely conscious of his importance. The letter was long.

Its final paragraph, if punctuated and spelled after the manner of Webster, which it was not, would have read as follows:

> And so I have decided to have you come here and live with me. Your mother would have agreed with me, I am sure, were she alive. And come clean and dressy, spick and span. I have a special reason for telling you this. Another thing, of great importance, leave that reputation behind you. Here you've got a chance to get started in a new community, and there's enough rough, no-good trouble-hunters here without adding another to the population. I've got some real propositions to talk over with you. So come as soon as you can. You have nothing to lose and all to gain. Your affectionate uncle,
>
> SAM

"Objections overruled! We aim to proceed forthwith to thet thar affectionate uncle o' mine—as soon as you can find the road, ol' pal," said Mat.

He patted the forehead of the blaze-faced roan, and in another instant was in the saddle, his horse's head pointing toward the south.

The road was a narrow, vine-like scraping through the parched scrub, leading to a point beyond the range of hills. Some distance from the tracks, Mat discovered the reason for the site of Spring Green. It was a thin, struggling stream coursing its way down the foothills from the mountains in the southwest.

The path widened now, and curved, and as the tired animal lagged around the bend, the rider could make out a thin spiral of smoke ahead.

"Don't give up, Silver, ol' pard," he urged. "See thet smoke over thar to th' south? I reckon thet's like it might be a sorter beacon-light to p'int out the trail to this heah wanderin' boy."

A FEW rods farther along Mat halted to slap the dust from his cow-punching clothes. He smoothed his hair, ran his finger along the creases of his hat, wiped his hands along the fringe of his neckerchief, and once more mounted and patronizingly urged Silver to proceed. The animal responded slowly, in fact with a trace of boredom.

A double curve in the road now lay before them, with Spring Green snuggling at the right bend, against the side of a hill. Spring Green was one of those settlements once moderately lively and now hardly hopeful. A mine which had given birth to the town some years before had not proved a good provider as a parent. The mine had petered out, and many of the inhabitants had ridden out or walked out. A few of the optimists had remained.

"C'mon, thar, Silver, y'ol' son-of-a-gun. Thar's fodder at th' end o' this trail. An' don't git discouraged. We ain't decided definite to accept thet proposition of Uncle Sam's yit. I shore would admire to meet th' hombre thet christened this metropolis. I reckon he musta be'n one o' them poets!"

Silver, however, did not respond as usual. His steps began to lag more than ever, if anything, though this time not through indifference. His quivering nostrils dilated. Nelson looked ahead to the northern outskirts of the town.

The thin wisp of smoke which he had seen back along the winding road had turned to a heavy, swirling black mass; and a pungent odor of burning wood pierced the air. Mat stirred his mount to a gallop.

Set back from the road as it turned the base of the hill was a small, two-story frame dwelling, now enveloped in a shroud of smoke. Little orange-colored flames licked quiveringly out from the blackness.

At an upper front window, a boy of tender years cried frantically for help. During the instant that Mat stopped to take in the situation, he saw a tall, heavy-set man beneath the window; a man who was holding out his arms and commanding the hysterical youngster to jump. Behind the man, beating against his broad back with her little fists, stood a young woman, desperately demanding more efficient action. The man turned and spoke to her impatiently, and half flung her from him. The woman wrung her hands, then made a break for the doorway through which an inky pall of smoke was pouring.

"Don't do that!"

The woman turned at the stentorian tone. Mat Nelson had spurred his horse and was making for the side of the building at an oblique angle. The staring woman saw the rider free his feet from the stirrups and, balancing himself with his hands, draw his feet upwards to the saddle. As the animal reached the building, the rider leaped, just caught the low second-story window-ledge and lifted himself through the curling smoke into the house.

A few seconds later a large body came hurtling through the side window, below which was a heap of brush and débris. Scarcely had the form touched the ground when a lick of flame vengefully leaped out for the man who had braved its wrath and rescued its seeming victim. But Mat was now lying supine on the pile of brush. To save the boy from injury he had clasped him tightly to his breast and swung backwards. The back of his own head struck the brush. The child rolled out of his arms to safety.

Not till she had hugged and kissed the little one did the woman have a thought for the unconscious man before her. Her escort tried to hold her back, but the woman's small, yet resolute, chin was set.

"Let me get to him!" she demanded.

Mat, therefore, on opening his eyes found himself softly pillowed on a woman's lap, although the first sight which met his gaze was a masculine facial expression denoting in its owner much the same gastric condition as that produced by a swallow of unpatented medicine. On finding themselves observed, the masculine features painfully and patronizingly contorted themselves into a smile of dubious congratulation.

From smaller quarters, however, proceeded a shy expression of gratitude which warmed the heart of the dazed man. A little hand crept into his big, rough palm, and a small head of tousled brown hair buried itself bashfully in Mat's bosom. The woman smiled down, and Nelson, finding himself strangely embarrassed, turned to the child. He pressed the tender fist and with his free hand lifted the blushing face.

"How old are you, sonny?" he asked. It was something, at least, to relieve his self-consciousness.

"Five and a half—going on six. I didn't mean to kick you," the child added.

"I didn't even feel it. Reckon mebbe you didn't kick me a-tall."

"Oh, yes, I did—right in the face. It's bleeding now."

THE little fellow looked with anxiety at a bit of grazed skin on the forehead, just above the left eye of the cow-puncher, where his heel had rubbed as he rolled from the arms of his rescuer.

The woman patted the abrasion lightly with her handkerchief.

"You'll hurt him," said the child solicitously.

"Aw, thet's all right," Mat deprecated. "What all's yore name, son?"

"My name is Richard Matthew Grove."

"Matthew? Waal, ef thet ain't one o' them—them coincidences! My name's Matthew, too. Ever been called jes' Mat?"

"No, sis calls me Dickie, but I don't like it. If your name's Mat I want to be called Mat. What's a—a coincidensus?"

"It's—waal, it's when two people comes together thet has th' same name. Shore. I reckon thet's what a coincidence is like. An' specially when both names is Mat. See?"

Dick saw. But his cogitation was cut short when Mat Nelson rose to his feet and was saved from falling to the ground from dizziness only by the steadying hand of the young lady, who had risen. Then, for the first time since his shout to her, Mat addressed the girl.

"Thet's all right, ma'am," he said. "Once

I git to my feet, I stay thar. I reckon you ain't the maw o' this little feller, are you?"

"Oh, no, sir," the girl replied, with just a hint of a blush. "Dickie is my brother."

"My name's not Dickie!" objected the boy, tugging angrily at his sister's skirts. "My name's Matthew, and I'm going to be Mat, just like—like him." He gazed up into the face of his new hero.

"Right y'are, sonny. You're goin' to be Mat, jes' Mat, like me," the big puncher declared, picking up his worshipper. "We two's goin' to git along right smart. It's Mat, thet is, with the consent o'—"

He looked down questioningly at the girl.

"My name is Grove," she explained. "Dorothy Grove."

"Waal, I'm shore glad to meet you, ma'am." The tall puncher set down the child and extended his hand to her. "An' my name's Mat Nelson."

"Very pleased to know you—especially under these circumstances," Dorothy Grove acknowledged. "You saved the life of Dickie—of Mat," she corrected.

At that moment a beam collapsed along the roof of the burning structure, and the speakers scurried away to escape a shower of sparks and embers.

"Jumpin' c'yotes!" exclaimed Mat. "Hyah I am standin' 'round as ef this was a Sunday School picnic or a barbecue, an' yore house a-burnin' down. Is thar a fire-hose in this town, ma'am?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't do any good here. We're too far from the right part of the creek, and the equipment's rather lacking. I reckon we'll just have to let it go."

For a moment there was sadness in the girl's eyes. But then she recalled the rescue of her little brother and clasped him to her. "I'm satisfied, though," she added. "Lucky it happened at noon time. I saw the smoke just as I was coming back with some lunch for Dick. I think it must have started in our chimney-flue. I'd meant to get it fixed."

"An' whar all did thet other gent come in?" asked Mat.

The girl flushed a little. "Oh, he just saw me riding down this way," she explained, rather haltingly. "I know him only slightly," she added, quickly. "He's no friend of mine. There's going to be an election here in Spring Green soon, and Clem Torry is being friendly to everybody these days."

"Waal, bein' as he's no friend o' yores, I reckon I got somethin' to say to him. Right to th' start thar, I didn't want to do no interferin', 'cause I sorter figgered he might be—yore husband, ma'am. But it's different now, an' th' more I think on it th' more I feel like I'm gittin' hot. I wanta see that feller afore I git too hot."

Mat Nelson circled about through the smoke to the other side of the burning house where he had last seen the big man, but the girl followed after him swiftly. "Oh, no! Please, Mr. Nelson!" she pleaded. "He didn't mean it."

Mat stopped. The man was not on the other side of the house; in fact, was nowhere in sight.

His anger cooled almost as quickly as it had started. He was more in a mood to listen to the advice of the pretty girl beside him.

"I SURE don't want you to get in any trouble through me, Mr. Nelson," she said.

"But I cain't be forgettin' thet he shoved you back thet time. I don't like to see an hombre a-disportin' himself thet way with a gal."

"Oh, well, perhaps he was excited. I don't want any man just riding through Spring Green to get in any trouble over me," the girl insisted, again. "And particularly with Clem Torry."

"You mean this Torry's a sorter bad-man o' these parts?"

"Well, not exactly. But he's a very important man. He all but runs this place. And he's a very tricky and dangerous man, they say. You must promise that you won't get into a fight with him over me."

Mat Nelson's steely blue eyes were bright with interest. Then they lit up with a twinkle, and his sound white teeth were disclosed in a grin.

"All right, ma'am," he compromised. "I'll promise I won't get in no fight with him—for that reason, but thar's no tellin' when a man's as ornery as I reckon he is might do somethin' to rile me. An'—but say, Miss Grove, thet looks like a mob a-comin' down the road. Looks like we're havin' visitors."

"They must have seen the smoke."

"In thet case," said Mat, "I reckon I'll be lopin' along. I don't want to meet no visitors. I look like I'm a candidate for a Chinese laundry, my duds all torn an'

full o' dust an' smoke, an' I promised my uncle I'd give him no reason to be ashamed o' me."

"No one would have any reason to be ashamed of you," returned the girl. "Does your uncle live here in Spring Green?"

"Yes'm. Sam Halliday's his name."

"Sam Halliday?" The girl looked at the cow-puncher with a new respect.

"Yes'm. He'll shore gi' me Hail Columbia ridin' through th' town this way."

"But you won't have to ride through the town," the girl explained. "See that double-bend back there? You can ride back and take the left bend Circle around till you cross the creek. You'll see a yellow house. That's Jim Lemmon's, and the house next to it is Mr. Halliday's. It's almost as short as going through the town."

"Thanks, ma'am."

Mat bowed, patted the boy on the head, and walked over to where Silver Dollar was muzzling among some clumps of grass at the roadside. He looked up the road. The visitors were rapidly approaching.

Leaping into his saddle he switched Silver Dollar's head toward the bend and as he galloped away doffed his hat.

He took the left bend, made a wide semicircle and crossed the creek as Dorothy Grove had directed. The road was clear, except for a lone rider who sat astride a motionless animal about a quarter of a mile ahead.

Mat slackened the pace of his mount, for Silver Dollar had covered many a mile during the last two days.

Ahead, loomed the single figure of man and horse, seemingly undecided on what to do. Mat, conscious of his soiled face and smoke-begrimed clothing, was sorry that he would have to be seen.

He was not sorry, however, for long. As he rode on, he noticed that the lone horseman was not in cowpuncher's regalia, but in store clothes. He took in the great bulk. There was no doubt about it. The horseman who waited there was none other than Clem Torry, the "dangerous" hombre—

Mat snapped his jaws shut, and his ordinarily somewhat full lips pursed tightly like a narrow crease of bluish-red. It was a characteristic habit of his, to purse his lips like that; it was once, when he had pursed his lips like that and gone into action, that he had earned the name of One-Gun Nelson. And it was when he pursed

DOROTHY GROVE

his lips like that, on some later occasions, that he had fully lived up to the name and reputation of One-Gun Nelson, a reputation spreading far beyond the confines of the belt where he had illustrated that one gun in the hand of a Mat Nelson could do more than two guns in the hands of almost any other hombre in Arizona.

Clem Torry, now hardly fifty yards away, looked down at a watch which he drew from a vest pocket. Silver Dollar, now in a lope, closed the distance between the two horsemen, while Mat Nelson, face averted from the man in the road, kept time with his mount's hoofs in repeating: "I promised not to, I promised not to, I promised not to!"

LIPS still tightly pursed and eyes averted, Mat loped directly past Clem Torry without looking up and without a change in pace. It took a tremendous amount of will power for Mat Nelson to take the peaceful way out of a row.

In spite of all his forced discretion, however, Nelson found it impossible to go through with his plan. Without a word of warning, he suddenly reined in Silver Dollar, circled about and rode back before the man in the roadway. His right hand swung easily at his side, but an observer of experience would have noted that it was not far from the low-swung holster at his hip. Possibly Clem Torry made this note. He

was silent, looking straight into the eyes of Mat Nelson. His left hand toyed with his horse's mane. His own right hand was held significantly low.

"I come back to tell you, hombre," said Mat, "jes' what I think o' you. I made a promise back thar thet I wouldn't fight on account o' what already happened, an' I won't. But I didn't make no promise not to tell you to yore face thet I think yo're a low-down, cringin' c'yote, an' so I'm a-tellin' yo' here an' now. No man ever shoved a woman afore me an' pulled away from it with a clean collar; but thet little woman made me promise, an' I keep my word."

Torry remained silent. There was a sneering expression on his blotched face.

"An' now," continued Nelson, "you know what I'm a thinkin' o' you. An' I figger to stay on a piece down at my uncle's, Sam Halliday's place. When you git to feelin' like you'd like to shove a man 'stead of a gal, step right down Sam Halliday's way, an' it may be's you'll git accommodated."

Clem Torry seemed unruffled, all except a baleful glint in his eyes. "And now are you through shootin' off your mouth?" he asked, coolly. "Well, if that's the case, let me tell you somethin'. I heard about your comin' here, and I *sabe* all about you. I recognized you when you came up at the Grove place to play grandstand for the lady. That's just why I came down here—Sam Halliday lives right next to that yellow house there, and either way you came I'd see you—right here, where there's no ladies, and no grandstands.

"When you rode right by me the first time, I thought I'd made a mistake; that maybe you wasn't Mat Nelson, after all. And I want you to know that you may be One-Gun Nelson to a herd o' greasers down your way, who couldn't shoot a hole through the broad side of a maverick, but you're just plain Mat Nelson to me—and I'm the boss of this town and all that the eye can see from here. Get that!"

"Is thet all you have to say?" asked Mat.

"That's all, Nelson. Just enough to show you that it ain't my business to fear any man, that I run this town and mean to keep runnin' it, and don't take water from anyone."

The two men sat there, astride their horses, their eyes rivetted on each other. Mat's active mind was busy sizing up Torry in a new light. Torry seemed more inclined to mix it than he had expected. He feared him not one whit more on this account, for fear was entirely foreign to Mat Nelson, but he respected him more. Torry evidently had plenty of self-reliance, and was certainly not as much afraid of a two-fisted, straight-shooting man as he was of a burning house.

"Waal," he said to Torry, "I made a promise, an' I aim to keep it. But thet don't stop my fingers from itchin' for yore low-down hide. You'd please me almighty ef you could think up some reason so's I could flatten you now, without breakin' of any promises."

"You're an awful peaceful hombre for a man with a reputation like yours, Nelson," replied the unruffled Torry. "I reckon that maybe I've given any red-blooded man a sure-enough reason to come down off his horse. If it ain't enough for you, then I'm sorry. My business ain't to go around tryin' to rake up street brawls."

"An' a lucky hombre you are, for thet thar reason," Nelson told him. "Seein' as it's thet way, an' seein' as I've told you direct what I think o' you, I'll be lopin' along. But it might be a plumb valuable thing for you to know thet I've got eyes in the back o' my head, an' kin shoot faster backwards then I'm gamblin' you kin shoot forwards. I'm turnin' my back on you now, Torry—an' I reckon you ain't enough even-chance gambler to take a chance."

Mat circled his horse about, his eyes keenly observant for any hostile sign behind his back. There was no such sign.

HE gave Silver Dollar his head, and soon was around the bend in the road and close to the yellow house that he had been told was Jim Lemmon's.

There was a slight rise at this point. From the elevated position on the back of his horse, he was just able to peer over the slight embankment to the left of the road, and catch a clean vista of the spot where he had challenged Clem Torry. Not such a coyote after all, that Clem Torry, despite the action back at the Grove house which had excited his ire.

But what Mat saw now at that spot suddenly caused his whole train of thought to double back. Where he had left one man, there were now two, and the second man was not dressed in street clothes but more after the fashion of Mat himself, whose

keen eyes caught a bulging of both hips which could be nothing but a pair of holsters.

"The dirty, low-down rattler!"

The puncher reined in his horse and watched the two men as they rode back toward the creek. "He had me covered all the time by that back-door gun-toter! No wonder he was willin' to mix it, an' no wonder he didn't want no grandstand or witnesses!"

Despite his uncle's earnest request and his own good intentions, Mat Nelson was keenly conscious of the fact that, the very first day in Spring Green, he had made a bitter enemy; all the more dangerous on account of his treachery. He looked after the pair of receding horsemen. Yes, probably he had two dangerous enemies, and, more likely, an entire gang of them.

He reined in Silver Dollar, and once more switched around the puzzled steed.

When Mat was living up to his reputation of One-Gun Nelson, there was no time like the present.

CHAPTER II

AS Mat was about to give Silver Dollar his head and burn the wind along the road that he had traversed, there was a shout from the yellow house which he had seen close by as soon as he had rounded the turn.

Mat looked over toward the house. A tall man who, judging from his gray horseshoe mustache might have been turning the corner of the sixties, had run out of the yard of the yellow house. He wore a long, frock coat and a soft black hat, and had a flower in his buttonhole.

"Hey, Mat!" he yelled. "Mat!"

With an agility surprising in one of his years, he ran down the street to the horseman.

"Whar all you goin'?" he asked. "Yo're at the right place now. An' cracky! Git right in th' house. Lor'! You 'pear like a scarecrow, an' I made a pertickler p'int of askin' you to come to town clean' an' dandy-like."

"Howdy, Uncle Sam," Mat greeted. "Waal, I reckon I don't look like no dude, but—waal, it's a long story."

He was gazing somewhat wistfully at the now disappearing forms of the two horsemen far down the road.

"Git right in th' house," Samuel Halliday repeated, nervously glancing back at the yellow house that he had recently left. "Cracky! I wouldn't have the Lemmons see you this way for anything. Git in thar, Mat, an' wait for me. I'll even stable yore hoss. Git in an' git washed."

Still nervously watching up at the front window of the Lemmon house, he guided Mat into the yard next door and opened the door of the gray-colored two-story frame structure. "Git busy an' git thet dirt off'n yoreself!" he advised again. "Jim Lemmon's like to come over any minute. I'll fix the hoss."

He looked reproachfully at Mat, as if that tall young puncher had been guilty of premeditated murder followed by mayhem. Samuel Halliday had an important and forbidding manner, as befitted his rank and ambitions in the town of Spring Green; he closed the door after his nephew, ran down the steps and started to lead the tired Silver Dollar toward a low stable at the rear of the yard.

"Don't water 'im much, Uncle Sam," Mat called through the side window. "Give 'im a right smart ration o' fodder, though. Thet ol' cayuse shore deserves it."

The dishevelled buckaroo found the bucket of water and a cake of soap which smelled of kerosene, and started to engage in a speedy and vigorous rubbing of his face and hands.

When, a few moments later, his uncle stamped into the kitchen, Mat was rubbing a glossily clean countenance—and a good part of the soapsuds—on a harsh roller towel which hung on the kitchen door. His uncle looked him over with a mixture of admiration and distaste.

"Yo're beginnin' to look more like a nephew o' Sam'l Halliday," he said, with dignity. "Only reason I reco'nized you out thar was by the blaze-face, an' 'cause I was expectin' you. Lor'! I was gabbin' with Jim Lemmon in thar, an' I near sunk

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through the floor when I made you out below th' windah thar. You looked like you'd been out in a norther in them clothes. I hadda use strategy—sent Jim out in the kitchen for a snort o' redeye to git rid o' him, an' I ain't took a drink o' hard licker for nigh onto eight year."

"My trunk git here all hunky-dory, Uncle Sam?"

"Yeah, reached here yestiddy. Jim an' me drove over in the buckboard to the sidin', an' we toted it back an' tussled it upstairs together. Git up thar, Mat, an' git dressed in somethin' respectable. Lor'! I wouldn't have Jim see you this way for anything."

Mat finished drying his gleaming, suntanned countenance. "This Jim Lemmon shore must be some dude," he remarked. "I'm admittin' free an' willin' thet I wouldn't win no beauty contest, but I had—had a little accident, you might call it, along the road, an'—wall, an' thet's thet."

He paused a moment, wondering whether to tell his uncle of the fire and the subsequent run-in with Clem Torry, and finally decided that he would not. He had no desire to appear as a hero, and seriously doubted whether or not his uncle would commend him for either experience.

"Jim Lemmon ain't no dude," returned Sam Halliday. "Yo're darned right he ain't. But Jim Lemmon's the best pard a man ever had. We've punched cattle together an' we've took a hand at minin' together, an' been pards man an' boy fur the best part o' half a century. Jim Lemmon's the kind they don't make any more."

HIS old eyes were gleaming in defense of his friend. Jim Lemmon might be the best of friends, Mat ruminated, but this important old uncle of his was the heart of loyalty.

"An'," Samuel Halliday continued, "Jim shore is hipped on seein' you. Him an' Fanny, his wife, thought thar eyes o' yore mother, too, boy; an' then Jim's right prosperous, an'—thar's fifty-eleven diff'rent reasons," he concluded, rather mysteriously, "why I want you to make an impression on Jim Lemmon. Waal, git up an' git dressed."

He showed Mat his room, and ten minutes later the nephew descended the stairs confident that he would win back the favor of his important-sounding but lovable old relative. He had donned a new punchers' regalia, wore new boots with a gleaming rowel, and athwart his damp and plastered locks was an expensive if somewhat impractical sombrero.

Samuel Halliday, however, looked at his nephew distastefully.

"Lor', Mat," he said, "I didn't mean to be gittin' in them cow-poke duds."

He came over and placed his hand affectionately on the young man's shoulder.

"Y'see, Mat," he said, "we're moseyin' over to Jim Lemmon's right soon. I reckoned you'd be all dressed up in a suit o' store-clothes, rigged out like a gentleman an' a man o' parts."

"I shore see many a gentleman rigged out jes' like this," argued Mat. "I'm a-gamblin' Jim Lemmon won't find no fault with this git-up."

Samuel Halliday sat down, and his face took on a look as if he was about to deliver a sermonette.

"Mat," he said, "it jes' won't do. You gotta git out o' thet camp an' trail sperrit now. I'm a big man in this town an' I'm goin' to make you a big man, as warrantin' the place o' Samuel Halliday's nephew. I ain't got no one 'cept Jim Lemmon since Sally married 'way up in Denver, an' it was jes' my luck to have a daughter 'stead of a son. Yo're my son now, Mat, an' ef th' ol' Saucepan Mine booms up ag'in th' way I calckerlate it will, yore days as an ord'nary waddy is plumb over. It's a chance thet many a man 'ud break a laig to git."

"But what all dija want me to do?" asked Mat, somewhat puzzled.

"I want you to take off them duds an' put on yore store-clothes. Jim Lemmon was a-tellin' me he'd heard as how you was called 'One-Gun Nelson' down yore way, an' don't wanta interdooce him to someone as looks like he might be goin' into a gun-fight an' depart this earth sudden-like. Thar's a special reason," added Samuel Halliday, once more with a hint of mystery.

"But I ain't got no store-clothes."

"Ain't got no store-clothes! Wall, you'll have to git yoreself a suit o' store-clothes. Meantime, it might be as I kin fix you up."

His keen blue eyes were running over the lengthy form of his nephew.

"You shore look like a Halliday," he said, with softness in his tone, " 'ceptin' you got the Nelson eyes—an' reppitation,

Never been a Halliday thet I kin remember thet was under six feet, the men folk, I mean. I got a suit I bought fur Sally's weddin'. It'll fit you right smart. We gotta make an impression on Jim Lemmon, y'know."

When the suit referred to was disclosed, however, Mat felt his ears burning, and although no one was present but his uncle, and the latter looking admiringly at the suit he held up, Mat's blue eyes lowered in embarrassment. The outfit consisted of a frock coat of a decidely statesmanlike cut, a pair of black trousers with a taped stripe down the sides, and a hard hat.

Mat's jaw clenched. "I won't w'ar that!" he said, determinedly, pointing to the hat. "I won't do it!"

Somehow, much to his own surprise he found himself getting into the suit. He sensed that his uncle had outmaneuvered him. The elderly man had compromised. He had a soft felt hat, and Mat could wear a pair of his own boots all but the feet covered by the trousers. Just his luck, Mat ruminated, the suit fit him very well!

HE decided that it was going to be very difficult for him to like Jim Lemmon, however much of a pard he might have been to his uncle.

"Fits fine," was the pleased decision of Samuel Halliday.

"It's mighty oncomfortable," Mat parried. "We kin make it do to go over thar, mebbe. But the first thing I'm doin' after thet, Uncle Sam, is to lope down an' git me a suit o' store-clothes."

"You'll go a long ways 'fore you find an outfit as peart as that 'un," said the admiring Uncle Samuel. "Lor', I never kin find anything in this shack since Sally up an' got married." He was rummaging around in a bureau drawer, and brought out a collar and a tie of brilliant hue. It was a very uncomfortable One-Gun Nelson who started out of the room and began to descend the stairs. He looked back toward the bed where he had discarded the clothing in which he had felt comfortable and natural. He had wanted to buckle on his gun, but his uncle's keen eyes were upon him.

His mind was still on the gun as he reached the bottom of the staircase.

"Jes' wait a second, Uncle Sam," he said, as his uncle was opening the door. "I plumb forgot somethin'."

Without waiting for any queries, he dashed back up the stairs. In a moment he had buckled on his gun under his coat. The holster formed a suspicious bulge on the right side, but he planned to keep on the right side of his uncle. Also, on coming through the front door, with somewhat of an ostentatious gesture, he pulled out a flamboyant bandanna. The bandanna might have been what One-Gun Nelson had forgotten.

Somewhat to his surprise, Samuel Halliday was already leading two saddled horses out of the low barn. He climbed to the back of one of them and led along Silver Dollar.

"Yore hoss finished his meal," he explained. "He ain't been watered much yet, but thar's a trough whar we're goin'."

"But I thought it was right next door," objected Mat.

His uncle had rather imperiously nodded for him to mount, and somewhat in doubt, Mat did so. The two men rode out through the gate and into the highway.

"Lor'! We cain't go right into Jim's an' horn in on dinner!" explained Samuel Halliday. "Not but what we'd be right welcome, but it ain't manners. An' you shore must be hungry. Sence Sally got hooked up I eat down to th' Railroad Café, a right peart place an' you can order jes' what you like, Mat."

"But I ain't hungry!" Mat lied.

"Waal, I reckon you kin eat shore-'nuff," said Samuel Halliday, "An' I feel like my belly's huggin' my backbone."

He put his horse into a lope, and Mat Nelson, with a feeling that was the nearest approach he had ever experienced to one of terror, had no choice but to follow along.

"Is it far?" he asked, nervously, as they loped along the deserted road.

"No, t'aint far."

"Is it near the railroad?" asked Mat.

"No, this is right in town. We ain't on no railroad, o' course, but we aim to be, some day. We called it th' Railroad Café 'cause if a spur's ever run over it'll go right through Grove's property to the station."

"What station?" asked Mat.

"The railroad station, o' course. We even built a fine station down thar. This town's goin' to boom ag'in, an' us prominent citizens wanta be prepared."

Hopeful at first that the Railroad Café

might be in some semi-deserted section, Mat's hopes sank lower and lower as they turned into what seemed to be the main street of Spring Green. His courage had finally seeped away from him entirely. He started to veer Silver Dollar and turn back. But Samuel Halliday had reached for the bit of Silver Dollar. "Right along here, Mat," he said. "This shore is a swell place we're goin' fur chuck."

As his uncle proudly pointed out the railroad station and some of the shack-like buildings of Spring Green, Mat nodded without turning his head. He was conscious that folks on the street were pointing at him, and as they passed a knot of by-standers who had, presumably, just returned from the scene of the fire, he heard a raucous burst of laughter, and he thought he knew what it was about.

HE would almost have given away Silver Dollar to be safely out of the scene; but it would be as bad or worse a gantlet to run now if he did turn back. His only possible haven was the Railroad Restaurant, and once he got out of there he could purchase a less conspicuous suit at the General Store and change in the back room.

The most embarrassed cowpuncher in all Arizona was Mat Nelson as his proud uncle led him across the veranda or "gallery" of the Railroad Café past a gathering of grinning loungers, and the most relieved one was the same Mat Nelson as he espied a table in the rear of the restaurant which boasted a more or less white tablecloth. He preceded his uncle, walked swiftly down the room and sank his dignity-draped body into a chair while he pulled the trailing tablecloth in such a way as to hide the tails of his coat. Seen from a few feet away he might look like a dude of sorts, but at least he did not look like some fancy scene out of a picture-book.

Mat sat with his back toward the kitchen; there were, at least, fewer folks to see the skirted coat from the rear.

The puncher wondered what would happen when he was through eating. Would the group he had passed by on the gallery be waiting out there with their raucous laughter when he went out?

So preoccupied was he with his thoughts that he was not aware of the waitress until she had come up beside him and placed the bill-of-fare under his downcast eyes.

"I'll have some Horse dee Oovries," said Samuel Halliday, without even glancing at the card.

There were several dishes on the bill-of-fare, but the first to strike the cowpuncher's eye was corned-beef-and-cabbage.

"Corn beef'n' cabbage," Mat mumbled bravely looking up at the waitress, who by this time had come back with two glasses of water.

If ever a cowpuncher felt two bullets passing through his head at the points where his eyes made contact with the outside world, and without actually being hit by hot lead, it was Mat Nelson, the very Mat who was known in several corners of Arizona as One-Gun Nelson.

At sight of the waitress, the surprise of seeing and recognizing the girl who stood at his side, garbed in white apron and rolled-up sleeves, the puncher almost crumpled. The waitress was Dorothy Grove, the same Dorothy of the fire and the little brother, Richard Matthew Grove.

She caught sight of Nelson's face at the same moment, and her surprise was hardly second to his own. She was in the act of placing down a glass of water, and in the moment of shock she spilled a little of it. She spilled it on the lap of Mat Nelson.

"Aw, thet's all right, Miss Grove," he deprecated, as the girl made an exclamation of distress. "Thet's all right."

"It was so unexpected, seeing you here!" the girl explained, weakly, a reddish hue suffusing her cheeks. Then, getting down to business at once: "What was your order, Mr. Nelson?" she asked. Getting down to business at once was probably her own salvation from embarrasment.

"Corn' beef'n' cabbage."

"What all does this mean?" asked Samuel Halliday, taken aback, after the girl had left the table.

"Oh, t'ain't nothin' much, Uncle Sam," stammered Mat, wondering how he could best explain the acquaintanceship with the girl.

"Waal, I'll be a greaser!" declared Sam Halliday. "You hain't b'en t' town more'n an hour at most, an' here y'are, a-callin' all the gals by name, already. How'dye know her?"

"She was the first person I met in town, and she directed me to yore place."

"An' you couldn't take the d'rections

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in the January issue of
Double Action Western

without first gittin' down her name? . . . Lor'! If my nephew shore ain't th' apple o' the ladies' eyes!"

WHILE Dorothy Grove appeared with the hors d'oeuvres so dear to the palate and pronunciation of Samuel Halliday and departed after Mat's more common fare, the puncher sat stiffly at the table, discreetly looking about him, and now and then seeing a grinning face at the window. Occasionally there was a burst of laughter from without, and once through the doorway came the chuckled statement: "I shore knowed he'd make fur thet table with th' cloth on it. Wow! I'll gamble as his han's is pure lily-white!"

Another gale of laughter followed this witticism.

Nelson continued to sit and reflect on his predicament. Here he was, One-Gun Nelson, all rigged up like the stage-door Johnnies back east that he had read about. And Dorothy Grove would see him. He felt, however, that Dorothy Grove had been perhaps as much embarrassed as he had been himself, and not necessarily on account of his appearance.

She must have felt humiliated that his first contact with her after their unusual meeting should be with her dressed in the plain costume of a waitress while he was dandied up like some dude on the stage. Women placed a lot of store on dress. Pity for the girl's feelings made him forget his own scrape for the time being.

Samuel Halliday's voice cut into his musings. "I smell smoke, like burnin' wood," said Halliday, turning his head and sniffing. "Been smellin' it all the way down."

Mat could not refrain from a short laugh, despite his doleful position. After all this, here was his uncle just smelling smoke! Sam Halliday looked at his nephew's mirth without understanding.

"What's so all-fired funny 'bout thet?" he asked, wonderingly. "Cain't a man smell smoke without his nephew laughin' like it's a funny story?"

"Waal, Uncle, it jes' struck me funny-like, yore jes' beginnin' t' smell smoke now. The Groves' home was burnin' down jes' as I struck town. Thet was why I looked like a stick o' charcoal when you first seen me over yonder by Jim Lemmon's house. The Grove home must be a pile o' smoulderin' embers by this time," added Mat.

"Hey, thar, Sam'l Halliday!" came a deep voice from the rear, as the sound of heavy footsteps approached.

Sam Halliday looked up, and his face broke into a smile. "Hello, Ed," he greeted. "This is the proprietor o' this here eatery, Mat. Meet Ed Grove. Ed, meet my nephew, Mat Nelson."

Mat rose half-way from his seat, a mixture of courtesy and withal discretion, for he needed the protection of that trailing tablecloth. He shook a ham-like hand which gripped his own large one as in a vise, and mumbled his pleasure.

"But I reckon I'm the one as should be right proud to meet *you*," said Big Ed Grove. "My daughter jes' tol' me you was in here fur a meal o' vittles. I jes' got back from th' house—th' house thet was, that is. She was tellin' me what we all owe you, Mr. Nelson."

"Mat was jes' now a-tellin' me you had an accident," said Halliday.

"An' is thet all he told you, man? Don't you know thet he saved my little son's life, a-ridin' like a streak o' lightnin' right inter a burnin' house an' takin' th' little feller right out'n th' flames o' hell? Sam'l, you've got a nevew thar what's worth more t' me than any man I ever laid eyes onto in all my life, an' I wasn't born yestiddy, neither!"

"Lor'!" ejaculated Samuel Halliday. "An' thar I was, a-cussin' him out fur comin' in lookin' like a cinder an' him not defendin' hisself nor tellin' me nothin' a-tall! I was over to Jim Lemmon's all mornin' an' we didn't know nothin' about it."

Mat took out his brilliant bandanna and patted his forehead. His face was damp with perspiration. It was proving a tough day.

If there was anything he hated, it was being made out as a hero, and if there was anything that made him still more uncom-

fortable, it was being laughed at undeservedly. Not that he wasn't a good fellow who couldn't take a joke at his own expense; he was the farthest man from a sorehead. But to laugh down a man in Arizona when that man doesn't deserve being laughed down is to invite swift action. And that was just what was happening now.

AT one and the same moment Mat Nelson was being played up as a hero inside the restaurant, and laughed down as a dude outside the restaurant.

For a moment Mat wondered whether anybody else in Spring Green, other than Clem Torry and his sniper, knew just who it was sitting with Samuel Halliday—One-Gun Nelson. He was inclined to believe that no one else knew, except, of course, his uncle, who would do his best to keep the matter secret, although Jim Lemmon knew already. But those fellows at the window, he believed, did not know, or they would be choosing more health-preserving measures.

Minimizing his rôle at the fire, Mat ingratiated himself readily into the good offices of Big Ed Grove, who by this time had noticed the gang at his front windows and door.

"I reckon them hoodlums out thar don't know a real man when they see one," Big Ed remarked. "An' I'll bet my cash register against a dollar Mex thet not a man of 'em knows it's One-Gun Nelson in here."

"How did you know, Ed?" asked Halliday, in some discomfort.

Big Ed grinned. "Waal," he said, "Jim Lemmon drops in fur a leetle snack now an' then. He was a-tellin' me yore nevew was a-comin' on. Darn' bunch o' yaller c'yotes, them fellers out thar. I wonder ef they know th' man they're pokin' fun at is th' man as plucked my son outa the fire whilst Clem Torry stood by an' watched the flames. No, sir! 'Tain't likely Clem Torry'd be the man t' tell 'em thet thar story, an' I reckon nobody else has been a spreadin' of it."

There wasn't much appetite in Mat Nelson. The red slices of corned beef lay before him almost untouched. In fact, Mat was seeing red all about him by this time. His Uncle Samuel was not one to overlook his symptoms.

"Now, see here, Matt," commanded Halliday, when the meal was over and he started to rise from his seat. "I ain't goin' to have any scrappin' with them thar ruffians when we leave."

With a supreme effort, One-Gun rose from his seat and followed his uncle to the cashier's desk at the front.

"You don't owe me nothin'," said Big Ed Grove, heartily. "Yore money's no good in this here emporium. No, sirree, Sam'l Halliday, you can't pay me nothin'. I'll never be able to pay off thet nevew o' your'n."

Mat hung back, more embarrassed than ever. His feelings were not improved when through the doorway came the falsetto remark: "Oh, ain't he sweet an' purty!"

"Had t'eat off'n a tablecloth 'n' everything," was another remark.

Dorothy Grove approached the desk, anxiety in her eyes.

"I hope you won't feel offended by these loungers out here, Mr. Nelson," she said. "I do hope you won't let them get you into a quarrel." There was a pleading note in her voice.

"Never mind, Dot," said Halliday, assuringly. "I know my nephew. I'll take care he don't do no quarrelin', when he's with me, thet is."

"An' he's a ladies' man, too," seeped in a gurgling remark from outside the door.

"Thet's shore a lady-killin' tie he's got on!" some other wit contributed.

That was not all that reached the ears of One-Gun. But that was all he cared to hear.

As Halliday passed through the doorway the crowd separated on two sides, making a lane for the distinguished citizen and his dude guest.

Without turning his head, Mat walked springily over toward the hitch-rail. There another surprise awaited him.

He found Silver Dollar all decked up like a circus horse; a band of colored tissue paper was knotted about his tail, and there was a wreath about his neck.

Samuel Halliday stood right behind his nephew, to prevent any sudden hostility on his part. Mat, however, was silent. He removed the paper trappings from Silver Dollar. Halliday climbed astride his own animal and waited.

A RAUCOUS laugh sounded from the jeering crowd behind Mat. In the front row of the gang of loungers stood a big, husky man, holding in hand

a bouquet of waxed flowers, evidently taken from some woman's hat, and prettily wrapped up and tied with a pink ribbon. He shifted his quid, spat copiously, and smiled a stained smile at the dude. It was a penetrating smile, half-grin, and more of cruelty and derision than of merriment. It did not, however, seem to have any effect upon Mat Nelson. The latter carefully removed the wreath from Silver's neck, and concentrated his gaze upon it.

"Looks like it mighta come from some undertaker's emporium," he remarked, with silky softness. He whirled suddenly, and deftly threw the wreath so that it settled over the head of the man holding the flowers and slid down around his neck.

The husky man seemed flustered; but he did not draw a gun. Seeing no inimical move, Mat leaped astride Silver Dollar.

It was then that the husky, tobacco-chewing man stepped out and with an exaggerated bow handed the bouquet to Nelson.

It was a big day in Spring Green, surely better than any show. There was a storm of guffaws, and a few ribald remarks.

Samuel Halliday looked keenly at his nephew; he scented trouble.

Somewhat to his surprise, however, Mat accepted the gift with a bow equally as exaggerated as that of the donor of the flowers.

"Thank you, stranger," he acknowledged. "From yore appearance," he added, softly, "I reckon you mighta picked these posies yoreself."

There was another burst of hilarity. But before it died down, One-Gun flung the flowers high in the air. His hand went into the bosom of the frock coat and with the speed of a striking rattler he whipped out his gun, and his thumb was fanning it. There was a stream of shots, and the head of each of the four flowers was separated from its stem before it reached the ground.

A hush came over the once-hilarious group. Mouths, opened a moment before for guffaws, remained open, but emitted no sound.

Then Nelson removed his black hat with a grandiose gesture, smiled, and brought down the hat swiftly but gently upon the flank of Silver Dollar. His horse reared and leaped into its graceful, elastic stride. Samuel Halliday, his mouth agape, gave his horse his head and followed.

Where there had been jeers there were now cheers.

"Jumpin' split-tongued rattlers!" exclaimed one man.

"Holy sufferin'—" started another.

But One-Gun Nelson did not turn his head. He was galloping up along the main street, his uncle hard-pressed to keep up with him.

One of the loungers removed his hat and threw it on the ground.

"Thet wreath come almighty near bein' useful, I'm a-sayin'," he said, sententiously. "Thet's the name thet gal in thar called him—Mister Nelson," she says. "Thar's only one man in all Arizony c'd do thet," he added, looking up at the crowd. "An' thet's *One-Gun* Nelson!"

CHAPTER III

ONE-GUN NELSON—and never after this episode was he known by any other name, except in his uncle's references—rode on in silence. Samuel Halliday trailed behind him, also silent. Samuel Halliday was silent because at this moment he was the proudest man in Arizona.

As they swung along, One-Gun looking ahead with soldierly straightness and Halliday gazing in admiration at his nephew, neither man happened to see a trio of heads behind the dusty window of a building diagonally across from the Railroad Café. The lettering on the window:

WADE AND MEADOWS
Attorneys and Counsellors-at-Law
Bail Bonds Commis. of Deeds

served partially to hide the faces, but did not keep the eyes of the three from peering out and seeing what had happened in front of Big Ed Grove's eatery.

Two of the faces were what might be called leering. The third, that of Carter Meadows, junior partner of the law firm, expressed mild curiosity. Meadows looked questioningly at the other members of the trio, Clem Torry and Bail-Bond Wade. These two vouchsafed no information to Meadows, but they looked meaningly at each other.

"Little excitement, I reckon," said Wade. "I'll see you in the back office about that matter, Clem."

The two retired to the back room, there to discuss the astonishing results of the

plan Torry had laid to humiliate Mat, and possibly to laugh out of town a man whom Torry had realized might prove troublesome and make shipwreck of all his smoothly-laid plans. He had hoped to effect some such result before the populace of Spring Green knew the real identity of One-Gun Nelson. It had seemed as if luck had been with him when, from the window of the dusty law-office he had seen One-Gun ride up and walk into the restaurant in his surprising regalia.

He had quickly rounded up one of his cohorts, Plug Keffer, whose very toughness collected a living from the world without much work. Plug Keffer's hands were far from lily-white, but their soiled condition was not due to any manual labor. It was Plug Keffer who had presented the bouquet to Mat.

Torry hid his feeling of wrath as he closeted himself to talk over the matter with Bail-Bond Wade. His first plan to rid the town of Nelson had failed miserably. But there would be other ways.

But Mat was entirely unknowing of what was developing back in the office of Wade and Meadows, and if he had known he was not the type to worry about it.

He continued to gallop his horse up the street, past the Atlantic Pool Room and the Pacific Hotel, these establishments with the oceanic titles being far from any body of water except the puny Pueblo Creek which trickled down the foothills from the mountains to the southwest. A slight curve in the street brought them in front of a false-fronted building known as "The Bank." This, however, although a profitable establishment, had a long horseshoe bar instead of wickets and vaults. Its tellers were bartenders. "The Bank" was a saloon.

The silence of Samuel Halliday was broken by a shout from a man who was exiting through the swinging half-doors and adjusting a cartridge belt around a buxom waistline.

"Hey, thar, Samuel!" called this armored figure. "What all's th' shootin' fur?"

"Hey, thar, Jason! Th' shootin'? Oh, t'warn't much to speak on. Jes' a little celebratin', thet's all. Th' boys has come out a-welcomin' like. Meet my nephew, Mat Nelson. This is Sheriff Jason Flint, Mat."

"Yo' don't say, Sam'l! Kin this be th' famious One-Gun Nelson, thet same nevew o' your'n thet yo' b'en expectin'? Waal, I'm mighty glad t' meet a man o' yore stamp, I shore am," he continued, extending a horny hand to the young rider.

"Cracky! Y'all 'pear to know his nickname," said Halliday.

"Yeah, I reckon many an hombre in Arizony knows thet name. I was a-talkin' with Jim Lemmon th' other day. He was a-tellin' me."

"He's the sheriff?" asked Mat, as he and his uncle finally rode on.

"YES, b'en sheriff for nigh onto thirty year. Mighty good feller, Jason, but I'm thinkin' ef he'd b'en more onter the job, y'might say, an' less easy-goin' he mightn't lived long enough to be licked on re-election. Y'notice he didn't git to th' scene o' thet shootin' down th' street. But then," Halliday added quickly, veering about to the defense of Flint, "Jason's never stood fur any dirty work or crooked manipperlations, an' there's them in th' town right now as seems t' intend sech manipperlations. Thet's why ol' Jason's goin' to be licked this time, 'cause thar's an element here backin' a candydate o' thar own—one they reckon they kin boss when he gits in."

They continued along, Halliday now more talkative since the spell had been broken. At the general store he suggested to Mat that the latter stop and purchase his store-clothes.

"No, Uncle, I reckon not," Mat decided, with an upward gesture of his palm. "From now on thar'll be no more picture-book suits for me. No, sir! I'm goin' to git right back into th' duds whar I belong, an' I'm goin' to stay thar."

For the first time in many a year, Samuel Halliday did not argue a point. Perhaps Mat was right after all. The young fellow had a reputation far beyond his own previous knowledge, and that reputation apparently popularized Mat with good folks, as Big Ed Grove, Jim Lemmon and now Jason Flint illustrated.

A politician of the old school, Samuel Halliday now vaguely realized that some very good results might proceed from Mat's popularity. Samuel knew how prone to idolizing a heroic character the rough and ready townsmen were, and if Mat could be played up sufficiently—well, here was a new development.

"Waal, Mat," he said, "I reckon you kin pack a gun in them clothes as well as you kin in yore cow-poke duds, jedgin' from results. But yore ol' uncle is a-pleadin' with you now jes' to mosey into Jim Lemmon's in them habiliments. T'ain't likely you'll ever be in this rigout ag'in, y'know."

"All right," Mat agreed, finally, "we'll drop into Jim Lemmon's, an' then th' sooner I git out o' these play-actin' duds th' better I'm a-goin' t' like this town."

"Good boy, Mat! You've got a way about you, an' I'm almighty glad t' see it! Lor'! I wisht yore mother'd lived to see you all growed up, it 'ud done her dear heart good."

Mat grinned. "Yo're all right, Uncle Sam," he said.

He was beginning to like this old uncle of his more than ever. He had not seen Halliday until today for a couple of years.

One-Gun Nelson was a man of quick likes and dislikes. He formed his opinions of persons and things quickly, and nine times out of ten was right; but often, when he found that he had made a mistake, he was equally quick in correcting his impression. One-Gun would not hesitate to go up and make friends with a man whom, for some element of misunderstanding, he had at first disliked.

Mat had been in Spring Green hardly two hours, yet already he was reviewing the people he had met and their relative standing in his estimation. For enemies, he had Clem Torry and the sniper, who, he now sensed, might be the burly ox who had handed him the bouquet of posies. Also, the man whom he had not yet seen, but who stood likely to defeat Jason Flint in the election for sheriff. One-Gun Nelson had formed a quick liking for the elderly, easy-going Flint, and for that reason if no other, any man opposing Flint was not a friend of Mat's. And also because, as Sam Halliday had said, that man was being backed against Flint by a gang of notorious ruffians and treacherous double-crossers.

As they drew up toward the yellow house next to the Halliday home, an elderly man wearing a broad hat, let out a whoop.

"Hey, thar, Sam'l!" he called. "Whar all didja go, back a piece? When I come back with that snort o' redeye you was gone. An' then Fanny had a job fur me up in th' attic, an' when I come down, you was nowhar in sight."

"Oh, we b'en down to th' Railroad Café, Jim," said Halliday. "An' Jim, I shore got a story of a little happenin' down tharbouts thet'll do yore ol' heart good. Meet my nephew, Mat Nelson."

JIM LEMMON extended a large hand in a hearty handshake.

"Young feller," he said, "I shore am glad to meet you. I'm glad to meet any nephew o' my old pard Sam'l Halliday's and I knowed yore mother well. An' I b'en hearin' plenty about you, young feller, how they call you One-Gun Nelson, an' all. I shore am glad to meet you. Come right into th' house. I want as you should meet Fanny. That's my wife."

The ex-miner guided them into the large yellow house. Jim Lemmon fairly swaggered as he made Mat acquainted with Mrs. Lemmon, a buxom woman in the fifties, who smiled and simpered at the tall young man in the impressive clothes.

"I don't know wuther you ever partake o' hard licker, young feller," said Jim Lemmon. "Me an' yore uncle, we was jes' goin' to have a little snort when he runs outa th' house on me. I ain't what you might call addicted to it, but I reckon this is a special occasion, as you might say."

"I—I don't drink," answered Mat. "No offense, though, Mr. Lemmon. An' don't let me stop you. I ain't got nothin' agin' it."

"Lor' bless his soul!" simpered Mrs. Lemmon. "If that ain't a fine young man for you. Don't tech that fiery ol' stuff. I mighta knowed that by the look o' him."

"An', he ain't no softy ef he is a peart dresser, maw," said Jim Lemmon. "Don't you know this is who they call One-Gun Nelson in several parts o' Arizona?"

"Oo-oh, One-Gun Nelson!" simpered Mrs. Lemmon. "What a romantic name. An' how is it they call you that, Mr. Nelson?"

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"Jes' sort o' happened," answered Mat, uneasily. "It—waal, it jes' sort o' happened, you might say."

"Happened nothin'," cut in Jim Lemmon. "This young feller's got a reppitation. He's like me when I was a young feller. Smart dresser, I was, but I never took no lip from no one. Nothin' like good clothes, 'specially when thar's a good man underneath 'em. I allus did go in for good duds."

He looked down admiringly at the black trousers braced on his own gaunt body. The suit to which these were the trousers had been the most expensive one in the mail-order catalogue. Jim Lemmon could have paid a thousand dollars for a suit and still have looked ill-dressed.

"I'd admire to show you how I looked as a young feller," Jim rambled on. "Fanny, whar's thet album—the red plush 'un?"

"It's up in the guest room," replied Mrs. Lemmon, using the word "guest room" with due impressiveness. Take Mr. Nelson up there; in fact you might show him around the house."

Jim Lemmon went about this task with alacrity. The two biggest houses in Spring Green were the homes of Jim Lemmon and Samuel Halliday, as befitting the dignity of two of the town's leading citizens and captains of industry. And of these two houses the Lemmon home was the larger, and necessarily so, for a total of eight persons resided under that roof, Mr. and Mrs. Lemmon and their six children, all daughters, the youngest member being seventeen.

About these daughters One-Gun knew nothing—or no amount of intrigue could possibly have inveigled him into entering that house in his present clothes. But Samuel Halliday knew it, which was one of the reasons for his insistent attitude with Mat, and those six daughters of marriageable age were probably one of the reasons back of Jim Lemmon's super-hospitality for the potential suitor.

Jim Lemmon ushered the young man upstairs and sweepingly pointed out a large front room. "This is what you might call a libr'y," he explained. "See, thar's books up thar. This 'un," he explained, taking down a translation of Homer's Iliad, "is th' Elleead. Darn' good author, thet Homer feller was. He's dead now."

He went on explaining various possessions of which he was duly proud. Samuel Halliday was looking at his nephew, hoping that he was impressed with such splendor.

"WE even got more bedrooms off'n the attic," explained Jim Lemmon.

"Mighty fine place," remarked Mat, feeling that some praise was expected. He saw the looks of his uncle, and wondered if his uncle knew how uncomfortable he was.

"Fanny don't want me to take you up t' the attic jes' yet, a-fearin' mebbe the gals wouldn't like it," added Jim Lemmon.

At the mention of the girls, One-Gun felt an influx of still further discomfort. Already he had seen three bedrooms, and there were still more above. How many girls were there in this establishment?

"I jes' wanta show you thet album," Jim rattled on. "I'd admire to have you know how I looked as a young feller."

He picked up a red-plush photograph album with a small mirror set into the front of it.

"Thar I was when I was ridin' range," he pointed out. "This is me when I went minin' it. I ain't sayin' as I was the best-dressed man in thet camp, but—waal, I reckon I held up my end," he added, proudly. "Thar was a time when all the young gals in more'n one county turned their heads back a piece t' see Jim Lemmon when he loped by."

He drew attention to the picture of a gawky youth of perhaps twenty, the Jim Lemmon that was; a youth wearing a badly-fitting suit of store-clothes with the bony wrists protruding from the all-too-short sleeves.

He passed over several daguerreotypes of ancient characters, a fair proportion with whiskers, relatives and ancestors, babies and little girls, and even a few favorite horses.

"Thar's Ophelia. She's my eldest daughter," explained Jim. "Not so darn' old, at thet," he added hastily. "Thar's Portia, she's the youngest, an' these here is Cleopatra, Octavia, Desdemona an' Iago. Maw an' me named 'em out'n a book thet th' preacher give us as a weddin' present."

Mat Nelson, no student of Shakespeare, would have found humor in naming a stallion Nellie, but no smile crossed his blushing countenance when he heard one of the girls called Iago. He was not in a smiling mood; rather, in more of a perspiring one. He would have crawled up

the chimney, to get out of this house, if he had had an opportunity to do so. He was thinking of those six girls as Lemmon rambled on: "Allus wondered ef I had a son whether I'd named him Othello, as Fanny always wanted, or after my ol' pard Sam'l here."

One-Gun was squirming. He thought the session over the family album would never end.

For half an hour, Jim Lemmon pored over the book, pointing with pride, explaining. "I wisht I had yore tintype in them duds, Mat," he said. "I'd shore give it th' place of honor."

"Waal, I reckon thet's enough for now," Jim Lemmon said finally; closing the red-covered book. "Some day I'll show you all through both volumes."

"Jim! Oh, Jim!"

It was Mrs. Lemmon's voice, calling from downstairs.

Jim went to the head of the staircase.

"Yes, maw," he answered.

"The gals are comin' back."

"My gals rode over to a friend o' their'n down th' road a piece early this mornin'," Jim explained, turning to his guests. "They had a welcomin' party fur another young gal as jes' got back from th' East. B'en way back to Topeka, she had."

THIS was the last straw. If ever a peaceful man was in a mood to commit arson, murder and mayhem under the roof of hospitable friends, that man was One-Gun Nelson.

Hardly knowing what to do, but knowing full well that he absolutely had to do something to escape, Nelson glanced uneasily over the room. There was no escape. His uncle was in the doorway, and Jim Lemmon was at the head of the stairs.

One-Gun walked over to the front window, and gazed out. Passing the Halliday house next door was an old buckboard driven by a girl, back of whom were several other female figures.

The wagon turned into the Lemmon driveway, and the girls alighted. The girls were of varying heights and widths, but in one particular they did not vary at all. Mat drew back as he saw the faces of the arrivals. The six Lemmons! If ever there were six citrus-faced females in one family, here they were.

He sidled over toward the door, edging between his uncle and Jim Lemmon, hoping to be able to run downstairs and possibly out the back way.

Already, however, a medley of soprano chatter floated up from downstairs; at least some of the girls had entered the house.

Back into the room edged Mat. The window was partly open. Mat Nelson furnished the other part; he slid the window completely up—there was no other way out of it now. He looked toward the head of the stairway. Jim Lemmon stood there with a complaisant smile, and there was an expectant expression on the face of Samuel Halliday.

"Come right up, gals," invited Jim Lemmon. "Howdy, Desdemona. Howdy, Cleo. Howdy—" He was greeting the girls one by one as they filed up the stairway.

Mat crawled out on the little balcony, and whistled softly to Silver Dollar, who with the reins over his head waited nearby. Silver lifted his head, whickered, looked up and spied his master. He slipped into his elastic stride and came running toward the house.

Mat slid down to the sloping roof and timed the animal's gait. He did not look up. There might be six girls looking down at him, to say nothing of Jim and Fanny Lemmon and an outraged uncle. He timed his slide down perfectly, landing squarely in the saddle. His feet found the stirrups quickly and he was galloping away before a shout came from the upper window. He did not look back, but gave Silver his head.

Samuel Halliday turned and looked at his old pardner. He was stunned and chagrined.

"Mat's a mighty brave boy, Jim," explained Samuel Halliday, "but he's skeared o' women folk. He is shore 'nough, Jim. My nephew's an orful bashful young man."

CHAPTER IV

ONE-GUN galloped down almost as far as the creek, then veered to the right and circled so as to approach his uncle's house from the rear. He would have to meet the Lemmon girls some time, there was no way out of that, but first he wanted to get into the house without observation and change into his puncher's outfit.

A wide semicircle brought him back of the lean-to at the side of the Halliday

barn, where he dismounted and still looking cautiously up at the windows of the Lemmon house, sneaked through the kitchen door of the Halliday home and up to his room.

Courage came to him as he stripped himself of the stagey garments and drew on his familiar outfit.

He knew he would have to answer to his uncle for his seemingly weird conduct back in the Lemmon home, and he was not surprised, as, just as he had completed changing and was knotting his neckerchief, he heard a step on the front porch. He heard voices, too, one unmistakably his uncle's, and the other unmistakably feminine. One of the Lemmon girls, probably. Well, at least now he was dressed to face the music.

He ran down the stairs and opened the front door, to look into the indignant face of Samuel Halliday, talking to a young lady who had her back turned to the door.

As the door opened, the faminine figure turned to face it, and Mat saw that it was Dorothy Grove.

A dappled horse was hitched to a sidebar buggy in front of the house, and the heaving sides of the animal indicated that, for some reason, Dorothy must have driven hard from the center of town up to the Halliday home.

"Howdy, Miss Grove," Mat greeted, removing his wide Stetson hat. "It shore is a pleasure to see you again."

"Well, I'm—I'm glad to see you," said Dorothy, "and—and maybe you'll think me forward in coming up here. But I wouldn't have felt right if I didn't. I was just starting to tell Mr. Halliday. After you and Mr. Halliday rode off from in front of our restaurant, there was quite a little excitement. Someone in the crowd recognized you as One-Gun Nelson, and there was some cheering."

Samuel Halliday, who had been primed to chide his nephew for his embarrassing conduct at the Lemmon home, was forced to smile proudly.

"Well, Mat did shore bring thet thing off right well," he conceded.

"But that's just it," Dorothy cut in. "It made Plug Keffer awfully mad. I reckon you don't know much about Plug Keffer, Mr. Nelson," she explained, "but Mr. Halliday here knows about him, and everybody in Spring Green knows about him. He's a bully that's terrorized most of the town; one of those men that's unbelievably tough, and he is right proud of it.

"Sheriff Flint came down the street before the crowd broke up, and asked what the excitement was. One of the boys in the crowd told him, and Sheriff Flint almost doubled up laughing. I heard him warn Plug Keffer that he'd have to be mighty careful while you were in town, or the next time Keffer might be holding the flowers in his hand, and they might be lilies, the sheriff said.

"The cursing of this Keffer made me start back into the restaurant so I wouldn't have to hear any more. But I did hear Keffer say that he'd—well, the expression he used was that he'd eat you right up before sundown. Plug Keffer is awfully vain, I know that."

"He might jes' have thet vanity thet goes before a fall," said Nelson, softly. "An' I reckon thet little meal thet this Keffer's a-promisin' himself'll shore give him a mite of indeegestion. Plug Keffer's a-gunnin' for me—is thet the idee, Miss Grove. Waal, I reckon he knows whar I'm a livin', 'n' I ain't seen him yit."

"But you will, I just feel it," insisted Dorothy. "He didn't come this way when he left, but crossed over to Wade and Meadows' law-office. Clem Torry lounges around that office a good deal, and I wouldn't be surprised if Keffer wanted to have a talk with Torry about it first."

MAT grinned. "I shore am obliged to you, Miss Grove—for yore intentions," he added. "Now, it's be'n my experience thet when an hombre talks as loud as this Keffer feller you b'en mentionin', he ain't so all-fired dangerous. Ef Keffer'd said nothin' but jes' sorter slid away like a whipped dog after he'd b'en caught killin' sheep, waal, then I'll admit as how thar might be a little to worry about. An' yore tip-off has been right valuable to me. I reckon I'll take a little lope into town. Ef this Keffer's such a right good talker, it might be as some o' his palaver'll be amusin' to my ears."

Samuel Halliday had now completely forgotten his indignation. On his face was an expression of mixed concern for his nephew and admiration for him.

"Thar a bad gang, thet Torry an' Keffer outfit," he said.

"I know somethin' about 'em," returned Mat, who, however, did not mention the episode of his first talk with Clem Torry and his sight of the two-gunned henchmen —probably Keffer—coming from behind the house where he had been planted by the cautious Torry. "Now, uncle, I jedge you'd admire to have me stay in this here town. Is thet right?"

"Thet's why I got you here," Halliday admitted.

"Waal, so I was a-figgerin'. An' I reckon I understand yore side o' the case all right, Uncle Sam, an' I'm wantin' you to understand mine. I've been in a few ruckuses on both sides o' the border, an' I've managed somehow to keep my hide hull an' entire. I'd say as much as thet Spring Green won't be no exception. But ef I'm goin' to stay in Spring Green, I cain't be no dude as looks like he's afraid. Th' time to meet trouble is 'fore it gets a good head start. I'm aimin' to ride into town. I jes' aim to take a peaceable-like lope into town."

Mat turned to Dorothy Grove. "Mebbe it wouldn't look right to have folks know that you was good 'nough to ride up here an' tip me off," he said. "Ef you don't mind a suggestion, Miss Grove, I'd say it 'ud be better ef you'd circle aroun' with yore buggy, drive over across the crick and come back into town thet way. I'm thinkin'," he added, "thet I'm goin' to remember you a long time, Miss Grove."

The girl blushed. "I owe you a great deal, for what you did this morning," she said. "And Mr. Halliday and my father have always been good friends."

"Yore paw is a mighty fine man," Halliday acknowledged.

Dorothy bowed her appreciation of the remark, and, after Halliday had gallantly assisted her into the side-bar buggy, she flecked the reins over the horse's back and drove on toward the creek, to circle back into town by the road that led past her burned home.

Mat Nelson had already taken his horse, Silver Dollar, from the Halliday barn, and had saddled and bridled him.

He saw the tall form of his uncle waiting in the shadow of the gallery of the Halliday house.

To avoid any possible warning from his uncle, he turned Silver's head toward the lean-to, and galloped over the lots back of the Halliday home.

SILVER'S hoofs splashed through the yellow waters of Pueblo Creek and soon were drumming along the road at a point between the burned Grove dwelling and the center of the town of Spring Green.

He drew up his mount beside a cottonwood tree, fished in his pocket, brought out four .45 shells, and after ejecting the four discharged ones that had figured in the episode in front of the Railroad Café, inserted the fresh ammunition in his gun. He handled the weapon lovingly before tucking it back into his holster.

"Miss Dorothy's a right nice gal, Silver," he said, "an' a truth-tellin' gal. She says Plug Keffer aims to ventilate yore ol' pard's hide afore sundown. Waal, we'll mosey aroun' an' see if this Plug Keffer's a truth-tellin' gent."

Once more the hoofs of Silver Dollar were drumming along the highway.

The rider passed a building surrounded by corrals and barns, from where the hoof-pocked trail eased into something more like the conception of a road. Spring Green lay straight ahead now. Nestling against a bluff to the right was the little cemetery, commonly known as Boot Hill.

A more visionary man might have turned his thoughts to mournful things at the sight of the slanting stones. A more visionary man might have stopped to consider that before the sun to the west of the town sank again there might be a fresh mound here.

But One-Gun Nelson, who was not a visonary man, galloped on.

"FOOLS rush in where angels fear to tread," some philospher once said.

The philosopher, however, did not have One-Gun in mind. Mat was neither a fool nor an angel. Had he been a fool, he would never have lived long enough to see Spring Green. And had he been an angel, he probably would not have lived long after his first sight of Spring Green.

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For Spring Green was populated largely by an element which made life hazardous for both fools and angels. To get along in this bedlam of danger, a man found it politic either to associate himself with the strongest party, which at this time was the gang dominated by Clem Torry, Bail-Bond Wade and Plug Keffer, or to go about minding his own business, without as much as appearing to be interested in the machinations of the evil triumvirate.

Realizing that rashness was the undertaker's most helpful ally, One-Gun did not gallop into danger on a foaming steed. A short distance beyond the little cemetery, he slowed down his mount. He was carefully noting each outstanding feature of the landscape, and constantly, with an eye far ahead of him, taking in each movement of persons in the distance.

He was not a man to underestimate his foes. Plug Keffer, he realized, must have been sufficiently outraged to do almost anything, if he really was as bad an hombre as Dorothy Grove had painted him. And there was every reason to believe he was pretty bad, for Plug must surely have known from Clem Torry that the man in the frock coat at the Railroad Café was One-Gun Nelson. And nobody but a bad hombre would take chances such as Plug Keffer had taken with a man of Nelson's reputation.

Silver Dollar was now in a walk. One-Gun swayed easily in the saddle, his muscles supple and loose, giving no inkling of the tension of the nerves within the rider, whose steel-blue eyes flashed hidden beneath the brim of his wide hat.

Those keen eyes did not fail to observe even the slightest motion of the most insignificant inhabitant as Silver Dollar entered the main street.

In his present situation, everything and everybody had significance for Nelson. He could not afford to overlook the fanning of a fly from a countenance in repose—it might be a signal.

Mat lowered his head, but not his eyes. Directly through the main street he progressed, slowly, from one end to the other. Nothing happened. Nothing, except that he had looked up at a window diagonally across the street from the Railroad Café and had seen the inscription of Wade and Meadows on the dusty window. There was nothing more to be seen. No faces peered out from behind the lettering.

At the end of the street, where it petered out and became merely a narrow, winding country road, Mat halted and looked over the landscape. Then he turned around and gazed back over the street he had just traversed.

There were more people to be seen now. Now there were men lolling in doorways, leaning up against the sides of buildings at spots where there had been no men before. There was a group in front of the Pacific Pool Room; another group found a center in front of the Atlantic Hotel. A few rounded the curve in the street where the false-fronted saloon, "The Bank," was located.

One-Gun pulled a sack of tobacco from his pocket, and calmly rolled himself a cigarette. He struck a match, enjoyed a couple of inhalations, and then turning his horse rode back quietly along the street.

A FEW of the youths and men lolling against buildings looked at him, then turned their eyes away. These men and youths had planned to be present solely as spectators of a drama; they wanted no rôles. No one spoke. No one hailed the rider.

Rounding the slight curve in the street, Mat saw a figure which looked familiar. The figure, with a generous circumference of cartridge-belted waist, was coming out of "The Bank." The man was Sheriff Jason Flint, whose activities seemed to center about the saloon.

The rotund sheriff looked at the lone rider, looked again, and then recognized him.

"Hey, Mr. Nelson," he called. "Thought I reckernized you. An' you 'pear a mite more comfortable in them clothes."

"Howdy, sheriff," Mat greeted. "Yes, I reckon this is somethin' more on my reg'lar style."

"I'd sorta suggest that I seize th' opportunity to have a little snort with you," said Sheriff Jason Flint. "I didn't make no sech suggestion front o' yore uncle. Sam'l Halliday's death on licker—these days; in fact, Sam'l has changed in more'n one way. Waal, ef you'll dismount an' mosey in this here palace o' refined pleasure, I'd admire to be the first citizen o' Spring Green to assist you in wettin' yore whistle."

Mat left Silver Dollar at the hitching-rack and followed the jovial official into the

saloon. Business seemed to be slow. An oldish, weatherbeaten man was entertaining himself at the end of the bar with a small glass and a tall bottle.

Another man either very tired or very drunk, sat at a moist table in the rear, his head pillowed in his arms. Still farther in the rear was a group of men talking quietly, except for an occasional guffaw. They were gathered about a circular table, and there was the click and clatter of poker-chips and now and then the slap of a card or a hand by a disappointed or elated player.

"Meet my frien', One-Gun Nelson," said Flint to the proprietor of "The Bank," at this lull in the day acting as his own bartender. "Reckon yuh mighta heerd o' him. He's Sam'l Halliday's nephew."

The proprietor of "The Bank" reached out a soft and slightly moist palm. "Welcome t' Spring Green, Mr. Nelson," he said. "An' the first drink's on the house. I figger I know what yore bev'rage'll be, Sher'f, an' you kin nominate yore pizen, Mr. Nelson, an' I hope it'll be the best in th' house."

"I'll have a little sody-pop," said One-Gun quietly.

The proprietor of the bank paused a moment, was about to say something and then apparently thought better of it.

"Kee-rect," he said.

He served the drinks, and disappeared to the rear room in response to raucous demands of the poker-players.

"Mighty busy place, this 'un," Flint informed Mat, as he balanced his whiskey preparatory to tossing it off. "Town itself ain't so busy, sence the Saucepan quieted down. When th' smelter an' the ol' stamp-mill was a-goin' it, an hombre'd have to stan' in line to git waited on here. Course they still got a good trade here. Fortunately Spring Green don't depend intirely on minin'. Thar's some good-sized cattle outfits not more'n a lope away, an' on pay-off nights an' Sattidays sometime, it seems like ol' times. Things has changed a lot sence I first buckled on my official authority. Thet was thirty years ago. I've been hearin' as some folks aim to git my star away from me this comin' 'lection, but I'm gamblin' thet when it's all over, ol' Jase Flint'll still represent law an' order in our fair community. Purty low-down gang here right now. And speakin' o' thet, One-Gun, this Plug Keffer as bragged he aimed to git you 'fore sundown is one o' the mucky-mucks of o' thet gang." The sheriff looked out through the half-doors. "He said 'fore sundown, but I reckon he was full o' red-eye. More like Plug Keffer to be doin' things like thet *after* sundown."

"I reckon things'll be all right," Mat reassured the law. "Have another drink."

FLINT took another whiskey. Nelson drank another glass of soda-pop. A few more loungers had come through the swinging doors.

Their drinks finished, the two passed out toward the hitch-rail. Jason Flint was telling the newcomer several things that his uncle had possibly planned to tell him. The puncher heard again of Clem Torry's domination, told by Flint, however, in such a way as to soften any reflection upon himself. He also learned that Torry had recently bought a sizable portion of land to the south of the town, the second purchase he had made since coming to Spring Green more than a year before.

"He's one o' them folks like's in the Bible," Jason continued. "One o' them as toils not, neither does he do any spinnin', but he allus has the *dinero* to git what he wants, I understan' he made Ed Grove an offer for his land this afternoon. Big Ed's house burned down this mawnin', y'know, an' I reckon Ed'll be glad to git rid of it."

As he left Jason Flint and mounted his horse, One-Gun realized that he was learning much about Spring Green. But there was much still to be learned.

Clem Torry offering to buy Ed Grove's property. Strange, mighty strange, that Torry happened to be in the vicinity of the Grove house at the time of the fire . . .

Various deductions were passing through his brain as Silver Dollar padded slowly up the main street. The rider grinned as he noticed that more people lined the streets now. People were coming out to see him, but pretending ignorance of his presence. They could not fool him, however, for something in the very stillness and attitude of the place breathed with expectant excitement. Evidently the word had passed rapidly among the townsfolk that Plug Keffer had sworn to get the scalp of One-Gun Nelson before sunset, and the townsfolk were eager to see just how that presumably difficult job was going to be accomplished.

This was going to be a Roman holiday

in Spring Green, and even the most peaceful citizens were coming out in the air for a sight of the gladiators, one of whom was cantering along the street in defiance of his most dangerous enemy. No hungry lions were necessary to add to the zest. A reckoning between Plug Keffer and One-Gun would be more than enough.

CHAPTER V

IN the suite of offices occupied by Wade and Meadows, attorneys-at-law, sat a group of not entirely legal-looking men. Just why a suite of offices was necessary for practitioners of justice in a town the size of Spring Green might not be clear to people who knew how much legal work could be accomplished in a small, single room in other towns even larger than Spring Green.

The answer lay partially in the fact that not all the business transacted in this suite was legal. And not a few residents of the little town of Spring Green were entirely conscious of this fact.

Bail-Bond Wade had occupied two rooms even before the entry of the junior partner, Carter Meadows, into the law firm.

When Carter Meadows had come to town, a third room was added to the suite —for Bail-Bond Wade, the senior partner in the new personnel, had no mind to share already existing space with Meadows. The latter would have to sit at a desk in a third room by himself. The arrangement was explained away as being more businesslike and indicative of prosperity becoming to practitioners of the law. But, while Carter Meadows might have been entirely satisfied with this explanation, it was not for the same reason that brought satisfaction to Bail-Bond Wade and his friend, Clem Torry.

These three, Wade, Torry and Meadows, on seeing the classical exhibition of gun-fanning by Nelson in front of the Railroad Café, seemed less moved to genuine appreciation of the artistry than several men at the time who were closer to the scene.

Meadows failed to appreciate the exhibition because he did not know how hard it was for even the most expert marksman to perform in that unerring manner. Meadows had no gun-toting experience, and no understanding whatever of the mysteries of the trigger. But Clem Torry and Bail-Bond Wade, both of whom were considerably better acquainted with the problems of marksmanship, failed of appreciation because of their utter chagrin. Here they were, witnessing the frustration of their best-laid plan to discredit One-Gun Nelson in the eyes of the populace and probably railroad him out of town. Here they were, seeing One-Gun Nelson turning the tables on them under their very noses and eliciting not jeers, but cheers, from Spring Green; and also impressing a number of hard-boiled characters with the knowledge that toying with One-Gun Nelson might mean flourishing business for the local grave diggers.

As Torry and Wade left the window with meaningful glances at each other, Meadows got up closer to the pane for a better view of the man who was causing all the excitement. He had heard Mat's name mentioned by Wade and Torry even before the man himself came to town.

"He's a killin' hombre," Torry had told Meadows a few days before, "and Lord knows we got enough trouble on our hands as it is, without a fellow of his reputation coming in and rounding up a following. The sooner that hombre's out of Spring Green —one way or another—the better I'll feel!"

Nelson's spectacular shooting convinced Meadows that the newcomer had all the accoutrements and abilities of a killer, but seeing him in a frock coat on the man's first sally into town, Meadows retained some doubt as to whether Mat had the personality of a violent, death-dealing bad-man.

In the second room of the original suite, the same room in which so many doings in Spring Green had been conceived and hatched before Meadows or Nelson had ever seen the little town, Clem Torry and Bail-Bond Wade were now closeted.

Torry leaned over and motioned in the direction of the closed door. "Meadows wants to get an eyeful of that dude gun-toter," he said.

WADE bit off the end of a villainous looking cigar.

"I'm afraid, Clem," he said dubiously, "that we've not gone about this Nelson person in the right way."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there were two ways of handling him. One was to get the jump on him and railroad him back from where he came from. We tried that—and failed—with-

out even considering the other way. I'm thinking, now, that possibly the other way would have been best; and that would have been to make him a friend and ally from the beginning, instead of an enemy. He's a dangerous enemy, you must admit that."

"I'll admit it," said Torry, slowly. "To you, not to anybody else."

"What do you think of trying the other method now?" Wade looked at Clem's features while asking the question as a feeler.

"With that hombre," replied Torry, unhesitatingly, "it would be like waving a red flag in a bull's face and then pulling out a piece of molasses candy with your other hand and offering it to him. You'd prob'ly find a couple o' horns goring you before you could duck."

"I reckon you're half-way right," concluded Bail-Bond Wade. "Nelson isn't going to fall for any taffy after this."

"I know I'm right," said Torry, rather elated that his confederate did not press the matter. His enmity against One-Gun had originally been impersonal; he had not wanted him in Spring Green for commercial reasons. Now, since the run-in with Mat he felt thwarted. He had a personal grudge against him, but did not want to feature this end of the matter with the cool lawyer in front of him.

"It's goin' to be somethin' harder than taffy that'll make him fall," said Torry. "But he's got to fall, and he's goin' to!"

Outside in the front room, Meadows was still at the window. Nelson and Halliday had already disappeared, but another scene of interest was occupying his attention. Sheriff Jason Flint had come up and laughed in Plug Keffer's face, and Plug Keffer was in no laughing mood. Plug was saying something, vociferously; and now he was crossing the street, directly toward the offices of Wade and Meadows, attorneys-at-law.

A moment or two later he stamped into the front office, and nodded gruffly at Meadows. "Clem here?" he asked.

Meadows nodded his head toward the rear of the suite. "He's discussing something with Mr. Wade," he said.

Plug shuffled to the rear of the suite and opened the door of the second office. Clem and Wade looked up.

"'Lo, Plug," said Torry. "What are you lookin' so mad about? What's up?"

Keffer flung his huge hulk into a chair and reached for the bottle of whiskey which stood on the table. He poured himself a generous slug and drained the glass.

"Plenty's up," he said. "Thar ain't no man in Arizony kin laff in my face, an' Jason Flint jest laffed at me, an' I'm sw'arin' thet—"

"You want to go easy with Flint," Torry cut in. "No use getting into—"

But Plug Keffer was in no mood for listening.

"Who's sayin' I'm messin' with Flint?" he demanded. "Flint's too old an' toothless for me to mess it with. Flint laffed at me after thet little happenin' with One-Gun Nelson over thar. You know—"

"We know," interrupted Torry. "We saw it from the window. Keep cool, Plug. Have another drink."

PLUG KEFFER did not keep any cooler, but he did have another drink.

"I swore I'd git Nelson afore sunset," he said. "I swore it—an' I will!"

"Well, he's gone, ain't he?" asked Torry. "Wade an' me saw him ride off with his uncle. He may not be back again today at all."

"He may not be back," agreed Plug. "But I'm gittin' him today, whuther he comes back or not. He'd liked to make a fool outa me. I'll git 'im, I tell you."

Torry looked over at his henchman. "Oh, I don't know about that, Plug," he said. "I know you want to get him, and I ain't sayin' that it would make me very sad. I'd like to see this bird planted nice an' safe under the chaparral. But wantin' an' gettin' him are two different things. There's only one way to get Nelson, Plug—and that way is when he ain't lookin'."

"What all you mean?" Keffer asked indignantly.

"Well, what I said is plain enough. One-Gun's a fast man on the draw. The best way to get him would be—well, from the back, I'd say."

Keffer's black eyes were gleaming. "Thet mighta b'en all right an hour or so ago," he admitted, "but t'ain't all right now. Everybody'd know I done it, for I swore to git him. I ain't sayin', either, thet it 'ud make me weep none; but if thet's goin' to happen it 'ud have to be someone else doin' it while I was in some other part o' town, a-talkin' to Grove or Jase Flint, or someone as could prove me an alibi."

"That's true enough," put in Bail-Bond

Wade. "And you don't want to do anything hastily, Plug," added the cool lawyer. "Now, sit down there and cool down. There's a bottle of whiskey, and don't punish it all. Clem and I have a little business to talk over. We don't mind you here—you're in the family, you might say."

Wade and Clem Torry retired to a table near a side window of the office, and began poring over some maps and plats which the lawyer took from a drawer. Plug, rapidly making friends with the whiskey bottle, paid little attention to the low-voiced discussion of the two men. The clock-hands marched around, and still the two men talked on. Plug Keffer, his feet now elevated to the altitude of his head, had fallen into a restful snooze. The lawyer and his crony did not wake him up. Wade finally put away the maps and plats.

"It's just possible," he said to Torry, "that this Nelson might go along minding his own business."

It was just possible, perhaps, but it was not a fact. At this very moment. Mat Nelson, in his cow-poke outfit, was riding into Spring Green.

"I doubt it very much," was Torry's opinion. "I'd feel safer if he was off the map entirely."

Wade nodded. Then he looked significantly up at Torry. "Well?" he asked.

"Well, there's this Slim Gelder," Torry said. "Slim's been drawin' meal checks on me for some time and ain't had a thing to do for the last two months."

"Can he be trusted?" asked Wade.

"We could sound him, an' find out. I might send Meadows out after Slim, and have a little talk with him up here."

This matter was discussed for some time, and finally Torry opened the door to the front of the suite. "Oh, Meadows," he said.

Carter Meadows looked up.

"We got a little business with that hombre they call Slim Gelder," Torry explained. "I'd appreciate it if you'd slip down an' see if you can find him."

CARTER MEADOWS, who was an accommodating young man not disposed to object at being made an errand boy for as important a personage as Clem Torry, his senior partner's crony, nodded and left the office. A few minutes later, he returned and rapped at the door of the rear suite.

"He'll be up in a few minutes, Mr. Torry," he said.

Some minutes later, Slim Gelder appeared in the office of Wade and Meadows, greeted Torry and Wade, and nodded gruffly at Plug Keffer, who had now come out of his snooze and was treating himself to an eye opener from the tall bottle. Gelder was an emaciated-looking individual with a pair of sharp eyes and a livid scar that ran down the right cheek from his temple to his lip, where it was lost in the wilderness of a luxuriant mustache, his most vital-looking feature.

"Howdy, Slim," said Torry. "C'mon in an' sit down. Have a drink."

Slim followed instructions, on both counts.

"Didja see what happened over in front o' the Railroad Café?" Clem asked the newcomer.

"Y'mean thet One-Gun feller?" asked Slim.

"Yes, I reckon they call him that, mebbe. Ol' Halliday's nephew. Mighty fresh sort o' customer. He needs a little tonin' down."

Slim wiped his mustache with the back of his hand. His piercing little eyes were levelled at Torry. He made no remark.

"He needs a little tonin' down," Torry repeated, smoothly. "An' I got all the respect in the world for you, Slim," he added. He smiled in what he meant to be a flattering manner. Gelder did not smile back.

"Well?" asked Torry, in a sharper tone.

Gelder was smoothing his mustache. "No, I ain't as dumb as all thet, Clem," he said. "I sorter figger yo're eggin' me to shoot it out with this Nelson feller. I respectfully declines thet job, Clem. I ain't committin' suicide these days. I'm quick on the trigger, but I ain't no blowhard, an' thar's men as I ain't pickin' fights with. An' One-Gun Nelson's one o' sech men. I never made no claims I was quicker'n he is. I never did, an' I ain't makin' no sech claim now."

Torry's expression reflected his disfavor. "An' what the hell d'you think you're gettin' paid for?" he asked.

"Not fur thet," replied Slim, promptly. "I'll admit I'm gettin' paid, an' I'm willin' to do as you say—most o' th' time. But life's mighty pleasant these days; an' I reckon I'd admire to live on a little while an' enjoy it."

Torry tried to hold in his wrath. "I sorta figured you'd be red-hot on this," he told Slim.

The latter shook his head, vigorously. "No, sir-ree! I'm plumb lukewarm on't; in fact, 'most ice-cold, y'might say." He looked over at Plug Keffer. "I understood as how Plug had been talkin' big 'bout this One-Gun Nelson," he said. "I sorter reckoned Plug was the man to git him."

"An' I'm tellin' you," retorted Torry, "that Plug ain't the man to get him!"

"I was willin'—" commenced Plug, "an' —"

But Torry had leaped up. "Never mind any talk, Plug!" he commanded. "I know *you* ain't yellah."

"An' who're you insinuatin' is yellah?" asked Slim Gelder. "I ain't, ef thet's who yo're huntin' at It's jes' thet I ain't got no quarrel with this Nelson hombre, thet's all. I ain't no more yellah then your are. Clem Torry!"

CLEM TORRY was beyond words now. He reached over and with clubbed right fist landed on the scarred cheek of Slim Gelder. The blow caused the little man to topple to the floor. "I'll show you who's yellah!" roared Torry. "Now, get th' hell outa here!"

Slim Gelder picked himself up slowly. His sharp little eyes were flashing. He noticed that Torry's hand was close to his holster, and that Plug Keffer had shifted so as to bring the table between them. It was no time for gun-play on the part of Gelder.

He backed over to the door. His right hand hung low while with the back of his left he smoothed his ruffled mustache. "All right, I'll git out!" he said. "I reckon my money sorter stops now. An' I jes' wanta say somethin' 'fore leavin', Torry I ain't yellah. My record kin prove thet. An' while I ain't sayin' I'm quick enough on th' draw fur One-Gun Nelson, I'm too damn' quick, Torry, fur you. Now, put thet in yore pipe, an' puff on it!"

He backed out the door, and a minute later the sound of his feet on the stairs came up to the trio in the rear suite.

"Well, there's another little rat that'll prob'ly join the good boys o' the town now," was Torry's opinion.

"I don't know, though, Clem, about slinging into him that way," put in Wade, the lawyer, dubiously. "Of course Gelder doesn't know much, but he could be a dangerous little rat."

"He could be a dead little rat, too," was Torry's addition. "I hope, Plug," he said, turning to Keffer with a meaning grin, "that you don't get in any gun-fight with Gelder. It 'ud break my soft old heart to see him layin' cold an' implacable in death!"

"Waal, I may break yore heart then, sometime," returned Keffer. "But, y'see thet plan o' yore's didn't come to much, Clem. I reckon, after all, thet it's up to me to chastise this here Nelson feller. Y'said I wasn't yellah, an' I'm not! I reckon I kin take keer o' myself."

He patted his guns in his holsters, and made as if to rise.

"Wait a minute, Plug," ordered Torry. "Things are still lookin' pretty good. Fortunately, Gelder ain't got anything on us. He riled up before we mentioned anything about gettin' Nelson from behind. I'd rather it 'ud been done the other way, anyhow. An' if Nelson got Gelder, it 'ud been small loss to me. I'd taken a chance on losin' him—but I ain't takin' any chance on losin' you, Plug."

Keffer, who had risen and was adjusting his holsters, sat down again, flattered by the evidence of Torry's regard.

"Thet's all right, Clem," he said. "One-Gun or ten guns, he don't make no fool outa me."

"But just a minute now," cautioned Torry. "You noticed Gelder didn't want any part o' Nelson, an' Gelder's as quick on the draw as you are. Just what did you say you'd do to Nelson?"

"I said I'd git him 'fore sundown—git his scalp is th' way I put it," and I tell you, Clem, thet's jes' what I aim to do!"

"All right," agreed Torry, smoothly. "Now, let's figure this thing out. We want to give Nelson a dressin' down, run him out o' town. All right. You said you'd get his scalp before sundown. Well, it ain't sundown yet. An' you didn't say how you'd get it. You might mean, y'know, that you'd pull it out by the roots."

Keffer's face was blank.

"I mean," continued Torry, "that there's no use in your takin' chances—with a gun. It's a little vanity of this Nelson, I understand, that he never draws first. He won't draw on you till he sees you goin' for your hardware. All right." He looked over the huge bulk of Keffer. "Now, why

not humiliate this bird good an' plenty. He's expectin' a gun-fight. You can go up to him, pull his nose or somethin' an' slam him in the jaw an' get him down. It's a ten-to-one shot with your size an' strength. He'll tangle with you that way, I'm wagerin'. An' when he does, an' you got him down—well, anything goes. There's plenty o' men out in Boot Hill that died quick deaths, an' no bullet-holes in their body, either!"

"A very good idea," spoke up Wade. "A good alibi, too, if anything should happen. Just a good man-to-man tangle—with unforeseen results, possibly," he added.

PLUG KEFFER, too, seemed to like Torry's idea. It was less of a chance for him, and yet fully as good an opportunity to make good his boast to humble Nelson. "Clem," he said, grinning, "you allus was good on new idees. You got brains, Clem."

Torry did not deny the charge. He got up, opened the door, walked toward the front of the suite and looked out of the dusty window.

Mat, now in puncher's clothes, was standing in front of the Railroad Café, talking to Big Ed Grove.

Torry returned to the back room. "Plug," he said to Keffer, "I reckon the Lord is with us. Your meat is right down there now, talkin' peaceable to Ed Grove. He's in front o' the Railroad Café."

Keffer took another drink, and stood up. "In 'bout two minutes," he said, "I'll be in front o' the Railroad Café, too. But I won't be talkin' to Ed Grove. I'll be talkin' to this Nelson feller. An'— Zowie!—what I won't be a-sayin' to *him!*"

He shoved a chair aside, stamped out the door and clattered down the stairs.

The men in the office of Wade and Meadows watched him, as he walked across the street toward the restaurant.

CHAPTER VI

MAT had been standing in front of the Railroad Café for some time, talking with Big Ed Grove. He had all but given up the idea of a tangle with Plug Keffer, who seemed nowhere along the main street of Spring Green.

Big Ed Grove, in his conversation, had happened to mention the badman. He had been seen going into the office of Wade and Meadows some time before, he averred, but possibly by this time had come out of the office. Big Ed talked of many things, told of the offer he had received from Clem Torry for his lot to the north of town, and, as Carter Meadows, on his errand for Torry, came out of the office and walked down the street, the peaceful-looking young lawyer was pointed out to Mat by Grove.

The gaze of the latter followed Meadows as he went into the Atlantic Hotel and then, after a moment, came out and crossed to the Pacific Poolroom. "Them's queer places for Meadows to be goin'," said Grove. "I never seen thet feller in a barroom or a pool-hall. Waal, bad comp'ny's gittin' him, I reckon. Thet's Wade's pardner, an' they say thet little feller's goin' to be our next sheriff. One o' Clem Torry's idees, to my thinkin'. Torry wants someone in office thet he kin handle."

Mat spent considerable time in talking with Grove. If, by any chance, Plug Keffer was still in that law-office diagonally across the street, Mat would stand talking with Grove and would give Keffer every opportunity to locate him. But, as the minutes passed, it looked as if Plug Keffer was more vocal than belligerent, and Mat leaped on his horse and was about to ride down the street and out to his uncle's home.

It was just then that Slim Gelder issued from the stairway door of the Wade and Meadows office and crossed the street. He seemed somewhat wrought up, and his right eye was discolored and somewhat swollen.

"Yo're One-Gun Nelson, I reckon?" he asked, addressing Mat.

The latter coolly surveyed the rail-thin man. "Thar's folks thet call me thet," he admitted.

"Waal, I figgered to inform you," said Gelder, "thet thar's a little conspire-acy afoot agin you. Plug Keffer's up talkin' with Clem Torry in thet office 'cross the way, an' I don't calckerlate they mean any good by you."

"I reckon I kin take keer o' myself," said Mat, calmly. He viewed the thin little man with disfavor. It was his opinion that, quite possibly, this disreputable-looking character had been sent by Torry in an effort to intimidate him. He rather doubted, now, that Plug Keffer would appear at all today. But his doubts disappeared when, a few moments later, looking across the street, he saw the burly figure of Keffer himself approaching.

A sudden and ominous silence seemed to grip Spring Green as the bad-man swaggered across the street. The only noise within hearing came from Plug Keffer's boots as they pounded the sun-baked clay of the street, directly toward Mat; and the pounding was heavy and slow, with affected laziness.

All the remainder of Spring Green was stock-still, on its toes, and stopped in whatever it had been doing.

Plug Keffer came to a halt directly in front of Nelson.

THE horseman did not move a muscle, just gazed through steel-blue eyes at the huge bulk of brawn before him. Keffer did not look into those steel-blue eyes, for if he had he must have quailed; no man in a mood of violence had ever stood eye to eye with One-Gun Nelson and come off first in the show-down. A sneer that was hard to work up, on account of its artificiality, spread over Plug's countenance.

"Waal!" he said, finally. "I'm wagerin' my pet rattlesnake ef it ain't our posie-boy, all dressed up like an ornery hombre. Bran' new suit o' punchin' clothes, jes' like he reckons he belongs in 'em! Ain't y'afeerd you're goin' to git 'em dirty afore Sunday?"

"I reckon I kin keep 'em clean enough, stranger," answered Mat. "I'll keep 'em clean enough, thet is, pervidin' no scum gits near me. An' I ain't aimin' t' let you git near me. See?"

"Lordy me, oh, my! What an ornery cuss this li'l dude do be!" answered Keffer, still affecting inspection of Mat's new clothes, to avoid the necessity of looking into a pair of steel-blue eyes hinting sudden death.

"Yo're Plug Keffer, I reckon," said Mat directly, "an' I heared as how you swore high an' holy thet yo're goin' to git my scalp afore sundown. Ef yo're goin' to be a man o' yore word, Plug Keffer, y'ain't got so much time to be beatin' aroun' the bush like, 'cause the sun's gittin' lower every minute. I come to town plumb hasty like so's to give you yore chanst. Don't be disapp'intin' me, Keffer, 'cause I do hate makin' this trip t' no purpose an' avail. My scalp is right here on my haid."

"Oh, I aim to be gittin' all th' enj'yment possible out'n this here entertainment afore the show's over, youngster," said Keffer, "an' I'm enj'yin' myself a-plenty." Which was not exactly so. Keffer knew that the eyes of Torry were upon him from the low-office window. Torry had said that Mat never drew first on a man—but anybody might make mistakes. Torry might have made a mistake. Keffer's grin was unusually wide in his forced amusement. "But don't turn 'roun' an' lope away on thet hoss o' your'n ef I happens t'come kind o' close t'you," he continued. "'Twouldn't look nice afore all these folks here, ef you'd up an' turn yaller. You got lots to learn 'bout the proprieties o' social conduc', an' I'm aimin' t'give you a lesson right soon. I might spile yore nice new clothes a bit in teachin' you."

It became increasingly evident to Mat that Plug Keffer had no real appetite for a shooting-match. While Mat had no fear of a man in a fist fight, he could not refrain from making some remark taunting Keffer with fear to shoot it out.

"I reckon thet yo're mighty close enough now for good shootin', even ef y'ain't no wizard on th' trigger," said Mat. "An', moreover, I ain't never b'en known to make a motion for my shooter till after th' other man starts to draw. I'll wait till you've got yore hand right on th' butt o' yore gun, Keffer, afore I as much as starts the trip t' my holster an' coöperates with our popular undertaker."

"Yo're a most obligin' gent, youngster," said Keffer, "but I aim t' prevent yore bein' buried in a clean suit o' clothes."

Feeling that the time was ripe for action, Keffer stepped forward toward One-Gun. Keffer had no mind to be drawn into a gun duel and it was well to stop parleying before Nelson showed him up as not being eager to settle differences with bullets.

"Thet's a smart-lookin' outfit you got on," Plug said, keeping his hands significantly high above his holsters, and taking a pinch of Mat's Levis between his fingers.

"Keep yore dirty hooks off'n me!" barked Mat. He turned his boot heel sideways and with his spur he rowelled Keffer in the chest.

With a shout of rage Keffer grabbed the foot at the ankle and yanked the rider from his horse. Mat, who had by this time freed his feet from the stirrups, was prepared for the attack, and in coming to the ground landed more after the fashion of a voluntary jump than as the result of a fall.

Plug Keffer was taken by surprise, for he had figured on Mat's landing at full length in the street, and towered ready to hurl himself down upon a prostrate adversary. Nelson, on his feet, whirled around like a flash and caught the burly Plug flush on the jaw with a well-planted right.

From that instant One-Gun understood why Keffer had stirred up a fist fight. Keffer was the first man in all Mat's experience who had ever remained on his feet after a solid punch like that. He knew that he was in for the biggest man to-man tussle of his life. And he was right.

PLUG KEFFER lashed out mercilessly with his superiority of possibly forty pounds. Had the two men scaled in before the fight, the younger would probably have hit the beam at one hundred and eighty, while Keffer would be good for close to two hundred and twenty pounds of hard, mature brawn.

As the mammoth Keffer and the lithe Mat whaled away at each other, the charm of silence seemed to have been broken. Men and youths were running now to the scene of the grim battle.

Each combatant, in his way, was a clever man with his fists. Keffer knew his own greatest asset to be his overbearing weight and steel-taut sinews of maturity, and he constantly bore in with the object of leaning his bulk on the lighter man and grappling with him while he administered fistic punishment. Mat, on the other hand, quickly understood that his own best opportunities lay in peppering the huge bulk before him at long range, at least until the other man should weaken before the onslaught. But Keffer did not show any signs of weakening. He seemed to have the granite jaw, and, despite his reputation as a drinker of alcoholic beverages, to have the recuperative powers of an animal.

There was still another threat facing Mat. Plug was a sniper, he knew that. He did not know, however, at what instant Plug might suddenly decide that there had been enough of fists, and attempt to seize an opportunity to bring guns into action. Plug would do that, of course, when sure that a decided advantage on the draw lay with him, if he would do that at all.

Once, Plug drew back his fist to start a long swing from the hip. Mat took no chance, and on seeing his opponent's hand so close to a holster, rapidly swung his own right down near the gun butt. There was, however, no gun-play. Several times Keffer started swings near the hip, and finally he noticed the suspicions on Nelson's part. He decided to take advantage of the situation. Starting a right near the hip, he saw Mat's right drop near the holster. Instantly, Plug lashed over a left, the right only feinting.

The surprise blow caught One-Gun square on the side of the head and sent a ringing tune through his ear. For a second he felt himself swaying. He reeled backward against a spectator and succeeded in maintaining a footing.

Sensing the advantage, however, Plug ripped into him, but Nelson slipped under the two flailing fists. When the big, ox-like Keffer charged again it was in a spirit of rage which made him forget the essentials of self-defense in an effort to land finishing blows.

It was just the opportunity that Mat needed. Keffer was playing for the head. Mat, who had already bruised his fists on the unshaven countenance of Plug and discovered that he might easily break his hand without stowing away his adversary for good and all, directed his attention to the midsection of Keffer. Dropping under Plug's charging fists, he planted two terrific blows, right and left, squarely above the Keffer belt-line. They were the most telling blows he had landed. The air fairly whistled out of the flailing gorilla like a hoarse steam siren. Keffer's eyes were crossed in pain and surprise for a moment, while a sudden and spontaneous outburst of cheers lauded Nelson's success.

Mat now went about his task with determination. Keffer could not take medicine in the stomach with the same unconcern with which he could let blows bounce from his jaw. Keffer was weakening, there was no doubt about it. He doubled up, his arms lowered, exposing a goodly portion of jawbone. It was too good an opportunity to resist. Mat suddenly brought up a right with full force on the point of Keffer's heavy jaw. This time it told a story.

With the wind knocked fairly out of him, Keffer could no longer stand up under a square hit on the jaw. Back he reeled, he staggered, and finally his great hulk struck the ground with a thud.

"Stand over 'im. Don't let 'im up!" someone yelled.

BUT One-Gun had his own ideas on how to carry on a fight properly, and he refrained from falling on the prostrate figure. He kept an eye on Keffer's hand, and his own hand was near his holster.

Blinking, Keffer rose to his feet. He was not unsteady. Something of the lion in the man told him that he, the king of the forest, had been felled by a foe for the first time in his lie, but not to stay down. A jungle fierceness directed his swaying senses, and he succeeded in defending himself as Nelson charged forward. Hardly conscious of what he was doing, he leaned forward and wrapped both arms around the lighter man. He put all his garroting strength into the hug. He realized that the turning point had come. Mat was getting the best of it. He was in better condition, for one thing. He, himself, could not stand that battering to his stomach. His wind was all but spent. Something else was necessary to turn the tide.

Somewhere, up behind a gilt-lettered window, were eager eyes watching, he knew —the eyes of Torry and Wade. The jungle spirit rose in the gorilla's breast and told him that to maintain supremacy anything was fair.

Mat succeeded in breaking loose from the grizzly-like embrace, but suddenly a knee came up and caught Mat with terrific impact. Like a bird shot on the wing, Mat folded up, swung round and curled to the ground.

There were yells from the crowd. Mat knew that he had been badly fouled, that his senses were almost gone, but just enough consciousness remained to tell him that where one foul came from, another was likely to proceed.. Through narrowed slits of eyes, he kept his sole remaining attention instinctively on Keffer's guns as Keffer hurtled down upon him, and what had been mainly a fist fight was lowered into a rough and tumble in which anything would go—gouging, kicking, bone-breaking, choking, biting, anything. Keffer's steely fists grasped Nelson by the throat.

The hands suddenly loosened a trifle, though, even if they did not let go. Mat had lifted a knee, and it sunk squarely into the stomach of Plug and rendered him momentarily as helpless as Mat himself. Weakly, the pair rolled over and over in the dust of Spring Green's main street. Still knotted to each other they both managed, somehow, to get to their feet.

Forward and backward they jammed, slugging, clutching, ripping, butting, wrestling, and finally were down again. Little spots of red now flicked the dust. Keffer's stained fangs had been sunk into Nelson's arm. Keffer took a smart thrust in his gory face as his right hand reached down and closed like a vise on the throat of One-Gun, while his two hundred and twenty pounds sprawled over the lithe form underneath.

Mat's breath began to come in short gasps. The puncher knew that he could not hold out very long in this grip. With a supreme effort he succeeded in grasping Plug Keffer's throat with his left hand. The wound in his left arm throbbed from the bite of Keffer. With his right he clenched the clothing about the abdomen of the gorilla. Mat's breath was now short, and his face was purple. A last act of desperation was necessary.

Jerking his back upward suddenly, with an arching movement of head and heels, he swung Keffer on his side, with the momentum of the same lurch, managed in continuing the swing till he reached his feet.

The vast bulk of Keffer was now in the air. A rasping intake of precious oxygen, for Keffer's hand still was tearing fingers into his throat, and Mat whirled about.

There was a wild look of terror in Keffer's eyes. He knew what to expect. Another whirl, and Nelson would smash him down into the street, like a wrestler of the old school. Keffer felt his grip slipping to thinner and thinner skin on the throat of Nelson. It was time for Plug's last act of desperation. Mat's both hands were busy, high in the air.

With cat-like rapidity, Keffer snatched at his left holster with his left hand, the right still weakly at Mat's throat.

Mat, whose eyes were pointing upward for just such a motion, caught the furtive act before Keffer could yank out the weapon. The sight of the sneaky move gave One-Gun just the added ounce of power that comes with outraged hate. With a maddened increase of fury, he whirled halfway round again, and with a mighty heave, flung the huge bulk of human body above his head across several feet of main street dust. The body hurtled into the glass doorway of the Railroad Café.

With the sound of crashing glass came the clatter of six-guns rolling along the

wooden floor of the low gallery before the restaurant.

ONE weapon had unloosened in its holster on the right side of Keffer, and rolled away, while the second gun was flung from the giant's hand as he struck glass and floor simultaneously. It clattered across the boards and into the street.

But still the battle was not over. Almost completely out of his senses, as might be seen by the look in his eyes, Keffer came charging from the gallery, directly toward Mat.

One-Gun timed his punch perfectly. It crashed, with every ounce of one hundred and eighty pounds of infuriated hate, directly on the mouth of Plug Keffer.

Keffer crumpled forward like a scarecrow with the props suddenly removed. When a man is hardest hit, he falls forward, on his face. That was how Keffer fell, flat on his face in the dust of Spring Green. He did not move; he just lay there, like a sleeping gorilla whose power had suddenly departed.

For a moment only, One-Gun Nelson stood over the prostrate form. He saw that the fight was over. His own head was buzzing. It had not been an easy fight. He looked about; there was a hazy circle of faces. The crowd still was too awed by the intensity of what had passed to burst out into cheers. Shocked into stillness, they merely stood, eyes bulging, mouths open, watching the movements of One-Gun Nelson. No one even picked up the six-guns. No one was interfering in this fight, even now, at its conclusive finale.

Mat happened to catch the staring face of Big Ed Grove, and the puncher pointed to the shattered door, "Thet'll be paid fur," he said. "I'll pay half—an' he'll pay half, I'll see to thet!"

Next to the café owner stood the corpulent form of Sheriff Jason Flint. He managed to grin at One-Gun, a sort of mechanical grin.

Mat stooped and picked up the two guns. A quick movement with each, and the cartridges were ejected into the dust. He handed the guns to Flint.

"Here, Sheriff," he said, "I reckon as no low-down hombre like our sleepin' beauty here is safe with playthings like these. He don't know how to use 'em. This hombre tried to snipe me off when I first rode into town, a-hidin' behind a buildin', he was. He's better without guns."

Jason Flint accepted the trophies.

"An' I also reckon," continued Mat, "thet you kin tag this here side o' beef an' ship 'im over yonder t' Clem Torry's hideout across the street."

Jumping into his saddle, One-Gun Nelson turned the head of Silver Dollar and rode quietly away from the sudden outburst of cheers that broke out from the crowd behind him.

He rode slowly. There was no hurry. He had ridden slowly into the jaws of death-threats before sundown. And now, just as the sun was sinking beyond the mountains to the west, One-Gun rode again, just as slowly, away from the death at which he had laughed.

CHAPTER VII

DOWN the main street of Spring Green rode Mat Nelson. Soon he was in the open highway. As he rode, he ruminated that there was some deep reason back of Clem Torry's immediate hate of him. He had seen fights picked before, certain fights even picked with him, somewhat to the ultimate chagrin of the picker; but seldom had he known of a more flagrant case of starting battle on small grounds than in the case of Plug Keffer, Clem Torry's henchman.

He passed the now entirely destroyed Grove dwelling, and reflected that Ed Grove had remarked that there were rooms above the hotel where the little family could live until he rebuilt on the same lot—assuming that he did not sell the land to Torry. Once more his thoughts turned back to Clem Torry. Humble little place, this was. Couldn't be worth very much. And yet Ed Grove had said that Torry had offered a surprisingly satisfactory price for it.

He rode on, crossed the creek and continued on to his uncle's house. He stabled his horse, and entered the building.

Samuel Halliday, working over some data on the Saucepan Mine, looked up.

"Waal, I reckon you made out all right, Mat," he said.

"Oh, it didn't 'mount to much, Uncle Sam," his nephew told him. Then he made shift to change the subject. "I reckon we'll have a chanst fur a little talk now, Uncle Sam, you an' me, I wanta learn something 'bout this town."

"An' yo're goin' to, Mat," said his uncle. "But Lor'! You shore do take yore laurels modest-like, Mat. Jim Lemmon was in town. He jes' dropped in fur a minute. Saw the hull thing from Prince's store, Jim did. Lor'! Jim says as how you mopped up the streets o' Spring Green with thet Plug Keffer."

"Oh, it didn't 'mount to much," Mat repeated.

"I had a talk with Jase Flint an' Ed Grove," Mat changed the subject. "Ed p'inted out thet little feller Meadows, they say Clem Torry's backin' for sheriff. My mind wa'n't much on him much right then, but now I think on't, he's a mighty queer little feller to be sheriff o' this town, ain't he?"

"Yeah, thar's a story back o' thet," said Samuel Halliday. "Y'see, no matter who holds office in this town, it's Clem Torry as pulls the wires. Thet Meadows shore is a mild-lookin' little feller, but he's in with a coupla crooks, an' I reckon they figger they kin handle someone like him. He's a queer sort, Torry is. Sometimes he kin even act like a gentleman. He's picked up consid'able land hereabout. He's offered me a good price for some o' mine. Seemed like a mighty fair price, 'specially the way this old town's b'en run down."

"Ef I know anything 'bout human nature," was Mat's opinion, "Clem Torry never offered a fair price fur anything."

"Waal, I don't know," objected Halliday, who chose to see the town of Spring Green through colored glasses and was inclined to over-rate Torry for seeing it in the same way that he did. He's no good—but he might see some future in this town. An' then he may have th' brains t'see thet the Saucepan Mine ain't as dead as some folks think it is.

"Y'SEE," he continued, "it's all a part o' the reason why I wanted you here in Spring Green, an' sence I see what you kin do I'm a-thinkin' on't more'n ever. The Saucepan's a fortune in the rough, as y'might say. Some day it's goin' to be producin' agin on a real payin' scale. With yore young blood, things 'ud soon be hummin' agin. I got th' money now to do things, I got th' equipment, an' the silver market's rose all over th' world.

"Now, with you in town," went on Halliday, "I reckon we'll git things boomin'. An' thet reminds me. In yore travels, have y'ever got acquainted with a gal thet you liked more'n you do yoreself?"

Mat grinned bashfully. He did not answer at once. "Aw, I ain't never had my affections tied up, ef thet's what you mean."

"Thet's what I do mean. An' I'm right glad to hear what you say. What I'm aimin' to discover is whuther y'ever promised some gal thet you'd ever come back to her."

"Aw, no," Mat answered. "Nothin' like that, Uncle Sam. I ain't denyin' thet mebbe I did meet a gal thet I'd liked a heap to know better."

"Waal, I reckon anyhow," said Halliday, "thet yo're not tied up, an' prob'ly ain't never knowèd the young woman yo're speakin' of intimately. I recall thet when I was young, I'd the image o' more'n one gal a-janglin' in my heart afore I up an' married the one an' only. It ain't likely as it'll be any diff'rent with you. Y'see, yo're twenty-five Mat, now. Thar's enough o' the Nelson wanderin' sperrit in you to make me worried thet some day you might up an' leave yore ol' uncle an' Spring Green. I'd liked to see you hitched to a good woman—right here in Spring Green."

"You speak as ef like you had some'un special in mind," said Mat, looking up rather nervously.

"Wal," said Halliday, "Jim Lemmon's got six o' the nicest gals in th' county. I ain't goin' so fur as to say they're purty, but Lor', thet don't make no difference. Them gals is all good gals. I'd shore like t' see you runnin' in double-harness with one of 'em."

"But Lor', Uncle, I like Jim an' Mrs. Lemmon all right, but Lor', I ain't figgerin' on marryin', Uncle Sam!"

"It 'ud be a fine thing," persisted Halliday. "Jim's got plenty o' money, an' he'd do right smart by a son-in-law. An' you'd be marryin' into good blood, don't forgit thet. Wal, I reckon y' might git washed up. Comin' time fur supper."

"I'll walk t' town ruther than ride Silver back ag'in," said Mat. "I shore like to straddle Silver, but I reckon I'll make th' trip to th' Railroad Café with one o' yore cayuses, Uncle Sam."

Halliday grinned. "We ain't goin' to git our chuck in town tonight," he said. "Y'ain't met Manuel yet. He's an ol' *mestizo* thet used to help out at th' Sauce-

pan. Jim Lemmon an' me keep him right busy. He does a little gardenin' fur Jim, an' he does cookin' an' tidyin' up fur me. Mighty good on *frijoles* an' sech, Manuel is. But you won't see Manuel tonight. We're invited over to supper to Jim Lemmon's. I reckon you'll feel better, Mat, in th' clothes you got on now."

"I reckon so," Mat agreed. Since it was inevitable that he should have to meet the Lemmon girls, now might be as good a time as any. A part of his old self-consciousness returned when, in washing up, he discovered that his left eye showed traces of mourning. He had been practically unconscious of it until now, and his uncle had not remarked upon it, doubtless believing that it might be a reason for holding back from the Lemmon supper. Mat put on a new suit of puncher's clothes, knotted on a clean neckerchief, and followed his uncle over to the Lemmon home. His unconventional departure from that residence on an earlier occasion was forgotten in Jim Lemmon's enthusiasm to discuss the fight with Keffer. Jim continued harping on this one string until hearing it got to be almost as embarrassing to Mat as the prospect of meeting the girls.

"Uncle Sam was a-tellin' me 'bout yore daughters," he said.

JIM LEMMON perked up, finally willing to drop the subject of the fight. "They're all loco to meet you, son," he said. "They're upstairs—primpin', I reckon," he added, with a significant wink. So Sam'l told you 'bout 'em did he?"

"He said he'd like t' see me married to one of 'em," said Mat, rather unexpectedly, having nothing else to say.

Jim Lemmon was all attention. "Which one 'ud you like to marry?" he asked eagerly.

Mat reflected on the group of vinegar-faced females he had seen alighting from the buckboard. There was not much choice in that group.

"Waal—er, which one 'ud you sorter recommend?" he asked, lamely.

Lemmon seemed disappointed. "Oh, then y'ain't got no ch'ice."

"I was just sayin'," Mat replied, "what Uncle Sam wanted me to say."

"Waal, you look 'em over, an' make yore own ch'ice," suggested Jim. "I reckon I hear 'em comin' a-clatterin' down right now."

Within the next ten minutes, Mat Nelson had passed through the ordeal of meeting all six of the Lemmon girls, and found himself sitting at the Lemmon table with the prospect of a nervous hour before him. Jim Lemmon sat at one end of the table. Halliday on one side and the simpering Fanny on the other. Mat had been placed at the other end. On each side of him was a trio of the girls, decked out to look their prettiest.

The Lemmon girls, he could now see, were even worse than the view from the buckboard had made them. No wonder, he reflected, they were single despite Jim's reputed wealth.

In appearance the Lemmon girls seemed to have gathered the most unsatisfactory physical characteristics of both Jim and Fanny Lemmon.

All of them had inherited old Jim's strongly Roman nose, which rather fitted the big-faced, gaunt ex-miner, but was ill-adapted to feminine beauty. And all but the misnamed Iago had fallen heir to the prominent teeth that Fanny must have had in her youth, although toothaches in middle-age had removed this outstanding feature in the mother. Especially did Cleopatra, the homeliest of the sextette, show her teeth frequently and generously in smiles possibly meant to be coy.

Cleopatra, Desdemona and Iago, just the ones who were lacking in stature, had inherited the fleshy tendencies of Fanny Lemmon; while Portia, Octavia and Ophelia, who could have stood considerable upholstery on their high altitudes of frames, seemed mostly skin and bone. Iago, the blonde one with the less prominent teeth, might have been passable except for a pair of eyes slightly crossed.

If Nelson had any emotions other than embarrassment as he sat there, they were principally of pity—pity which gradually subsided, however, as the meal progressed, for despite the fact that there were mirrors in the Lemmon home, the six Lemmon girls showed plainly that they had no mean opinion of themselves. Their dresses, too, were expensive; they had taken after Jim inasmuch as they seemed to pay the highest prices for raiment with the least common denominator of results. Their gowns ran largely to brilliant pinks and violent purple, and Desdemona carried a feather fan. Mat decided that the cross-eyed Iago was the most attractive of the lot; but he agreed

that if the best qualities of all of them had been united in one girl he would have been far away from love at first sight.

As great wedges of Fanny Lemmon's succulent pie were served in concluding the meal, it became evident that the Lemmons had talked themselves out. The pie was eaten in comparative silence, except for the click of Cleopatra's teeth.

Not being sure of the proprieties, no one wanted to be the first to rise from the table. The silence and the lack of action became painful.

Previously no one had mentioned Mat's discolored eye, but now Jim Lemmon, feeling that this might be as good a subject as any, made this the general topic of conversation. Jim Lemmon found it humorous in its way, and on one occasion he leaned back to give fuller vent to a hearty laugh.

Possibly mistaking this for a gesture of rising from the table, the Lemmon family pushed back their chairs and rose as one individual. Mat followed suit. After that dinner he could stand anything, and he managed to get through a half-hour's visit in Fanny's "guest-room," although he was careful to fight shy of any further abuse of the family album.

When he finally made his devoirs and took leave with his uncle, he breathed in the fresh night air with delight.

"Waal," asked Samuel Halliday, when he and his nephew had returned to their own home, "I reckon we had a right smart evenin' o' pleasure."

"I reckon so," Mat agreed.

"Nice gals," suggested Halliday. "Not so purty, but—"

"Yeah," said Mat. "Thet's right, Uncle Sam. I wanta ask you somethin', Uncle Sam. Was th' Lemmon gals the reason you got me here in Spring Green?"

Samuel Halliday hesitated. "Waal," he admitted, "I ain't sayin' as it wasn't part of it."

"Then I'm goin' to play squar' with you, Uncle Sam," his nephew told him. "I'll slap my cards right on th' table, as y'might say. I'm right glad you sent for me. I'm learnin' new things 'bout Spring Green every minute, an' I reckon it'll prove plumb interestin'. But I don't wanta do any bottom-dealin', Uncle Sam."

He paused a moment. Mat Nelson had that day risked his life in a burning house, been on the verge of a gun-fight with Clem 'Torry, had been jeered at in a frock coat and had gone through the toughest hand-to-hand combat of his life—and the Lemmon supper stood out in bold relief as the most painful incident of the day.

"I wanta play squar'," he repeated. "An' I'd say say thar ain't one o' them Lemmon gals as suits my taste. Mebbe ef they had a seventh one, it might be diff'rent."

"They ain't no hoity-toity beauties, but they're plumb wholesome," argued Halliday. "Y'cain't tell. They might sorter grow on you."

"They might," Mat admitted, "but I'm a-wagerin' they wouldn't. It 'ud take an almighty long time, an' by th' time they growed on me, I figger I'd be beyond th' marryin' age. But I shore am glad you got me here t' Spring Green," he concluded.

CHAPTER VIII

Although Mat Nelson had run into considerable action during his first day in Spring Green, the following days of the week passed with little more exciting events than riding down to the Railroad Café with his uncle for noonday dinners, sitting in front of his uncle's great wood fireplace in the Halliday home evenings, when the mountain wind swept down, and learning many new and interesting things about the social texture of the community.

Manuel, the *mestizo* servant of Samuel Halliday, had been pressed into more active service about the place. He prepared breakfasts and suppers.

Mat, embarrassed rather than thrilled by hero worship, did not enjoy his trips to the Railroad Café and his rides through town. He had enjoyed seeing Dorothy Grove occasionally, but his uncle, possibly hoping that a romance might flower, in some weird way, between Mat and one of the Lemmon girls, had not failed to acquaint his nephew with the fact that Carter Meadows, the young lawyer, was looked upon with favor by Dorothy Grove. Meadows was inclined to be dapper and smooth-spoken. Meadows was looked upon with favor by Big Ed Grove, who, while he did not approve of the companions of Meadows, rather liked the up and coming attorney.

Spring Green itself seemed in the doldrums, although behind closed doors in the

Atlantic Hotel and the pool-hall and "The Bank" there was much talk of the historic fight between Keffer and One-Gun Nelson. The matter could be discussed freely in such establishments, for Plug Keffer was not seen about town, and it was known that the stall in the barn where he kept his horse was empty.

In the offices of Wade and Meadows, Keffer's whereabouts was not a matter of mystery. Torry and Wade discussed the matter now and then in the rear office, around their little table. They still referred to their maps frequently, although there was no "Bought" cross-mark on the mapped location of Ed Grove's acreage. Torry half-suspected that One-Gun, whom he had occasionally seen talking with Grove, had advised the restaurant man not to sell.

"I could handle Grove all right, if it wasn't for Nelson," he told Wade one afternoon, "but I'm afraid Grove'll hold out if this nuisance keeps advisin' him. An' I feel that if he sees Ed weakenin', he might up an' buy the place himself."

"I don't reckon he has any money to speak of," was Wade's opinion. "An' Halliday's loose cash is mostly in the Saucepan, I'd say. Even if old Halliday got on to the thing, I don't think the word 'oil' would make him much excited. That's always the way with those old mining hardshells. Halliday's heart's in silver, or maybe gold. That's all that means quick money to his type."

Which was not an illogical analysis. In that period of the West, the magic words were silver and gold. Oil largely meant only illumination for the lamps. It did not have the significance that it would have now. When oil finally took its place as one of the big strikes of certain sections of the West, and keen-minded men visioned great fortunes from it and even then fell short of realities, gold and silver men still looked askance at it. Their contempt, although milder, was almost of a piece with the contempt of cattlemen for sheep-growers and handlers.

"I'm hearin' that this Nelson hombre has some money of his own," said Torry. "I reckon his father was a heap different from ol' Halliday, more wanderin' an' fightin' aroun', an' some way, I don't know how, he even got hold o' some oil int'rests. That's where this Nelson's little money, whatever he's got, come from, I understand. I got it sorta indirect. Halliday's thick with Ed Grove, an' Ed told his daughter, an' she happened to mention it to Meadows. This Meadows, even if he is a little squirt, stands to be a valuable man to us, Wade."

"Then if he knows or suspects anything about the game," said Wade, "I'm afraid he'll convince Grove to hold on to his property."

" 'Fraid so, too," admitted Torry. "Dam' it! I'd hate to think," he added, looking up significantly into the poker face of Wade, "that Grove's house burned down mysterious an' accidental, all for nothin'. Things ain't lookin' so good. This Nelson's gettin' too strong a hold on the public o' Spring Green, too."

"I WOULDN'T get unduly exercised over the matter," the calmer Wade suggested. "Old Halliday and Jim Lemmon, the only money-boys in this neck o' the woods, don't know a thing about oil, or else they'd have taken advantage long ago of the rich opportunities here. I wouldn't worry."

"Yes, but with this One-Gun around, they might soon get on to the situation. Already he's been snoopin' around, lookin' over some fields that 'ud have no ordinary interest to a cowpunchin' greenhorn. That merely proved that cowpunchin' ain't all there is in this Nelson's head; an' that he ain't a greenhorn."

Wade nodded. "I'm quite conscious of the possible risks," he said. "We can't take any chances on having the ground shoveled away under our feet by Halliday and Lemmon money."

"Exactly. One o' the most important stretches for our purposes is Ed Grove's property. If Halliday or Lemmon get on, we're licked there. Grove would sooner sell to them anyhow, than he would to us. The whole thing simmers down," Torry summed up, "to Nelson. That young firebrand has got to be run out o' here, or we're licked proper."

The matter was discussed at some length. Torry's crafty brain and Wade's cool legal reasoning power treated possibilities from several angles. They finally agreed that there was no danger from such old pay-dirt prospectors as Halliday and Lemmon. The menace was Nelson. But how to remove the menace, effectively and quickly. That was the question.

"Keffer'll be back before long," said Torry, as if this might have a bearing on the situation. "We'll see what Providence sends along to us," he added.

As a matter of fact, Plug Keffer did return to town. Practically a week had elapsed, and as it usually takes more than one licking to down a Plug Keffer, the bad-man's spirits seemed almost as buoyant as ever. Such discreet souls as might have hoped to gloat over a quieted and humiliated bully, found reason for disappointment. For Plug Keffer seemed as boastful and challenging as ever. He discussed his shooting prowess more than formerly, hopeful that he might, by overbearing vocality, even make capital out of the tussle with One-Gun.

He made a practice of laughing loudly during his drinking-bouts in "The Bank." Perhaps he chose this retreat for two reasons. He was fond of liquor and, in fact, held it rather well. Usually it made him glow without stupefying him. And Mat, a teetotaler, would not be apt to come to "The Bank." Also it may have been that he laughed just to show that he had no reason to hide his now practically toothless mouth. That final pile-driving right smash of Nelson in front of the Railroad Café had effectively removed a quartette of stained front-teeth from Keffer's mouth, and Keffer was going to brazen things out.

"I notice this One-Gun ain't made himself so copious aroun' Spring Green sence th' day o' thet—thet little inceedent," said Keffer. "Anybody knows thet I near had 'im licked," he rambled on. "Oncet, jes' oncet, I slammed him with my fist, an' if thar hadn't b'en a crowd aroun' to hold him up, I'd 'ave had 'im down—an' thet 'ud b'en the end o' thet. Anyhow, I'd figgered on a gun fight, a real man-tussle. I reckon he didn't want no part o' me thar. No, sir-ree!"

He gulped a glass of whisky. No one interrupted.

"I b'en informed," he went on, "thet this feller's all-fired quick to pick up my smoke-wagons when they dropped. An' what's he do with 'em?" he asked. "What's he do with 'em?" he repeated, challengingly. "He han's 'em over t' Jase Flint, the sher'ff, thet's what he does. This Nelson feller was afeard o' them guns, thet's the reason."

He did not choose to mention that he had demanded the guns back from Sheriff Flint, and that the corpulent official, now somewhat firmer in the duties of his office with the backing of Nelson, had refused to give them back. Torry, he felt, would get around Flint and get them back somehow.

IN his nightly boasts at "The Bank," Plug Keffer had one member among his audience who occasionally took part in the performance. That was Slim Gelder. Despite his short and ill-favored body, Gelder had little fear of any man in Spring Green. He was still spending the money that Torry had paid him at intervals before the altercation in the office of Wade and Meadows, and the fact that there would be no more money coming after his present stake was spent, served to store hate in his venal heart against Torry, Wade and Keffer. He believed the trio capable of any treachery, and was not far wrong.

Gelder had the heart of a born mercenary, brave enough, but sunk into no particular cause unless there was payment back of it. More than once he had planned to fraternize with the forces in Spring Green that he could see were gradually rallying under the leadership of the popular leader, Mat Nelson. He made no attempts to make up with Torry, and once had laughed openly at Keffer's toothless mouth. "I don't know, Keffer, but what thet change in you mightn't be an improvement, at thet!" he said, one evening in the bank. "I reckon them front tusks o' your'n wa'n't what I've heerd tell of as bein' teeth like pearls. Fact is, Keffer, they allus looked more like smoked pearls to me."

His general cockiness and drunken banter was proving increasingly irritating to Plug Keffer. The latter's black eyes gleamed at him more than once. He made no further come-back. It was plain to him that Gelder had no fear of him. Gelder was quick on the draw.

Slim Gelder did not stop with baiting the defeated Plug Keffer. Occasionally he made bold to stop Halliday or One-Gun on the infrequent visits of the latter to the center of town, and took to lounging about the Railroad Café rather than the bar of the Atlantic Hotel, the Pacific Pool-hall or "The Bank." His money was running low, and he was drinking less.

Mat knew hardly what to make of this strange, wizened character with the bristling mustache and sharp, shoe button eyes.

Rather sneaky-looking, he thought, but since Grove did not act belligerently toward the fellow in his own establishment, Mat continued to tolerate him.

Mat had finished his noonday dinner in the Railroad Café early one afternoon. He was alone on this occasion, and he had a tendency to dally. It was not that he had planned conversation with Dorothy Grove. The latter, he now realized, had some special interest in Carter Meadows, whose office was just across the street. Well, Dorothy was a mighty nice girl. But he, Mat Nelson, had no intentions of poaching on another man's preserves.

He did, however, have a desire to meet Carter Meadows. He had received somewhat conflicting reports of the young attorney, from Ed Grove, from his uncle, from Lemmon and others. A strange little man, too, to have ambitions to become sheriff of such a community as Spring Green.

Slim Gelder happened into the restaurant. The incident might have had no sequel had not Gelder been carrying Dorothy's little brother, Richard Matthew Grove. "My name's Mat, I tell you!" the youngster was insisting. "Me an' this man here's got the same name. Ain't we?" he asked Nelson sitting idly at a table.

"We shore have, Mat," he answered smiling.

GELDER smiled back. He put down the boy, who after one of his frequent visits with Nelson, ran back into the kitchen of the restaurant for any delicacies that he might find.

Gelder took advantage of the situation to converse with Nelson. "I jes' come from 'Th' Bank'," he said. "Cracky! Thet Keffer's an awful blowhard, ain't he? He's down thar a-gassin' on how yo're afraid thet he'll git his guns back. He says yo're plumb afeard o' them guns. I took occasion," he added, quickly, "t' inform him thet he was almighty wrong on thet proposition."

"I'm obliged to you," said Nelson, quietly. "Jes' whar?" he asked, "didja say this fire-eatin' double-shooter was at?"

"Down t' 'Th' Bank.' He's allus shootin' off his mouth down thar."

One-Gun got up from his chair. He idled out through the door, sauntered down to the bend in the street, and came across Sheriff Jason Flint, who usually could be found not far from "The Bank." Greetings were exchanged.

"I reckon, Jase," said Mat, finally, "thet mebbe it mightn't be sech a bad idee to give thet Keffer hombre back his playthings. From what I'm hearin', I'm thinkin' it might spare the ears o' consid'able o' the popoolation o' Spring Green."

After some discussion, Sheriff Jason Flint waddled down the main street, and then waddled back up from his office again. In his hand he held the two pearl-handled six-guns of Plug Keffer.

"Call Keffer out," suggested Nelson.

Keffer was called out of "The Bank." It was the drowsy hour in the barroom. The proprietor, tending bar at this idle period, also came out, and a curious lounger, whisky-glass in hand.

"Sher'f Flint," said One-Gun, "I'm hearin' thet this citizen o' Spring Green sorter feels undressed, as y'might say, without his ol' sixes. He's intimatin' as how he might have some use for them sixes. Accordin', I'd suggest that you return 'em. But jes' a minute thar, Sher'f Flint. I was the hombre as unloaded them guns. I reckon it 'ud be a mark o' politeness to load 'em ag'in."

Nelson walked over to Sheriff Flint. The action brought him about ten feet from Plug Keffer, standing there before "The Bank." The bad-man's jet eyes were gleaming hate. He watched Mat as the latter, taking some cartridges from his pocket, filled the chambers of both guns. "Thar loaded, sher'f, right t' the muzzle," Mat said. "I'd suggest as how you slip 'em back into Keffer's holsters."

Sheriff Jason Flint, from the rear, slipped the loaded guns into the bad-man's holsters.

One-Gun stood there near the hitch-rail. His hands were hanging limply at his sides.

Plug Keffer chose to make light of his humiliating position, to pass it over as matter of fact. "Thankee, sher'f," he acknowledged, carelessly, as the weapons were slipped into his holsters. His beady black eyes held Nelson's steely blue ones for just an instant. Then, with a continued air of forced carelessness, he turned and re-entered through the swinging doors of "The Bank."

There was a raucous guffaw back of Mat. He turned. Slim Gelder was standing there, his heavy mustache curled in an irritating grin.

"YORE comin' t' town has sorter brought back th' ol' fire in me," Sheriff Jason Flint was saying to Mat, as they stood there before the hitching-rack of "The Bank." "Cracky! I feel like a young feller ag'in."

Flint waddled over to the rack and leaned his heavy form upon it. The two men stood there, facing "The Bank." The owner of that institution was no believer in ventilation, but a window was opened perhaps six inches. Through the narrow opening could be seen the front of the bar.

"Yore uncle was a fire-eater in his day," rambled on Flint. "Course he's an important man now, an' the fire in him's sorter—"

He stopped abruptly. The irritating laugh of Slim Gelder floated out through the open window. There was some gruff remark from Keffer. Whatever it was, it served only to intensify the alcoholic laughter of Gelder. "It jes' might be you could buy a set o' them purty wax teeth," Gelder was saying, between chuckles. "Kin y' chaw terbacker, Plug? I'm wonderin' ef ye kin. Here, le' see ef you kin chaw terbacker with them gums o' your'n. Here, le's see—"

Sheriff Flint was walking toward the swinging doors. "Slim's a leetle teaed up, I reckon," he said over his shoulder. "Neither one amounts to much, but then I'm sher'f, an'—"

Mat was looking through the partly-opened window. Slim Gelder was offering a plug of tobacco to Keffer. He could see the grinning, mustached face of Slim, and the right hand, held high, offering the brown oblong to test Keffer's biting powers.

Jason Flint was puffing up the steps. He was still calling something back at Mat, when there was a shot from the interior of "The Bank."

Mat Nelson saw the lifted, tobacco-filled hand of Slim Gelder sink out of sight. In four long leaps he was inside the barroom, on the heels of Jason Flint. The proprietor was running from the rear of the saloon, followed by several men who held cards in their hands. Plug Keffer stood there with his six-gun in his hand. Slim Gelder lay face upwards on the floor, his dark eyes staring, his drooping mustache curling over his open, silent mouth.

Keffer turned to gulp his unfinished glass of whiskey. He set it down, and picked up his gun from the bar, and was about to turn.

"Keep lookin' right ahead o' you, Keffer!" came the command from One-Gun. "Don't move yore head. Keep a-lookin' into thet mirror in front o' you. Mebbe yu'd admire t' see what a murderer looks like!"

For answer, Keffer elevated his hands above his head. In this position he turned around.

"Murder, nothin'!" he growled. "He was aimin' t'git me. He was a-devilin' me an' a-threatenin' me, an' he went fur his gun. I beat 'im to th' draw, thet's all thet was."

Sheriff Jason Flint disarmed Plug Keffer. The latter shrugged his shoulders. Through the soaped mirror he could see the reflection of One-Gun Nelson, his six-shooter in his hand.

"I reckon no 'un seen this," said Flint, turning to the group that had now gathered in the room. "Did *you* see it, Rush?" he asked the proprietor.

It developed that Rush Merrill, the proprietor, had not seen it. He had been called back to the poker party to serve drinks in the rear room, just a moment before, he stated. No one else, except Keffer and Gelder had been in the bar-room.

"I ain't sayin' Slim Gelder wasn't devilin' you," said Jason Flint to Keffer. "Fact, I heerd what he was sayin', an' I didn't hear no threat in them remarks. But I do know thet Slim Gelder had a run-in with you an' yore gang not long ago, an' I do know thet he was as quick on th' draw as you be, quicker, if anything. An' I do know thet Slim's six-gun is right in his holster this minute. I calls attention," he added, in a legal manner, "o' the gents in this room to see whar thet weapon o' Slim's is—right in his holster, ain't it? Awright. *But*—" and Sheriff Jason Flint held this bombshell for the last, "all thet's what we might call in the law as bein' circumstanshul evidence. *But*, when I breaks through them doors, th' shot 'ud b'en fired, but Slim's gun hand was plumb two feet above his head with a plug o' terbacker in it. An' thar's the plug o' terbacker on the floor."

"Yo're wrong! It was a fair gun-fight!" insisted Keffer. "It was—"

"It was murder!" cut in One-Gun. "I seen it myself. Slim Gelder had a repitation as a quick man on th' trigger, an' thar

he lays with his gun in his holster. I'm minded," he said, advancing a step and looking straight into the wavering eyes of Keffer, "t' let you demonstrate thet yo're so all-fired much quicker'n a quick man with a gun."

THE eyes of every man in the room turned on One-Gun, who continued:

"Ef he wants to demonstrate thet, Sher'f, give 'im back his guns. I say I seen it. He says it was a gun-fight, 'Twon't take long, I reckon, to prove which one's a liar!"

A pallor overspread the heavy face of Plug Keffer. Torry could probably get him out of this. Torry had suggested once, back in his office, that he wished Gelder out of the way. But the official voice of Sheriff Jason Flint rang out importantly.

"It 'ud be th' quickest jestice, One-Gun," he admitted, "but right here an' now is th' time to show th' public o' Spring Green thet law an' order's goin' to pervail in our community. Jason Flint's sher'f here, an' it's his authority as is speakin'. I shore don't like to interfere with yore pleasure, One-Gun, an' I'd shore admire t' see you chastise this here hombre, but he's b'en proved a liar already. This is a plain case o' murder, an' it's a-goin' to end up with a rope necktie party after fair an' judicious legal trial accordin' to law."

"I'm willin' to go 'long," volunteered Keffer, nervously. He put his wrists out for the rusting manacles that, finally, Sheriff Jason had found an opportunity to use.

"Ef he is, then, I reckon thet what you say about th' law is plumb true," agreed Mat. "I'm submittin' sher'f, that a fair an' legal trial might be th' best way after all o' sendin' this murderer to Boot Hill."

CHAPTER IX

THE next few days were to write a page in the history of One-Gun Nelson that he had never before experienced. The higher his popularity grew in Spring Green, the greater in proportion grew the dangers to his person, for a man with enemies cannot become a hero peacefully when those enemies stand to lose all in the wash-back of the hero's power.

Mat and his uncle, Samuel Halliday, had already talked matters over decisively.

"Waal, I reckon I done a lotta things in my time," Halliday had said. "I b'en nurse to cows an' wrangled some mighty cantankerous hosses, I've placer-mined it an' took my fling at minin' on a right big scale, an' I b'en interested in politics now an' then, but I'm thinkin' the best piece o' work I ever done was to git you here in Spring Green. You shore have made a right royal beginnin'. It was jes' a thought o' mine at first, but right now I'm plumb beyond th' thinkin' stage. I'm primin' myself Mat, to do things, in this town—with you. Marryin' into th' Lemmon family wa'n't my only plan. Fur as ropin' one o' thet Lemmon herd—wall, I reckon thet plan o' mine's about over, But thet's secondary now. I got another real idee!"

"What's thet, Uncle Sam?" asked his nephew.

"Waal, one is t' clean up this here town so's the ol' Saucepan kin smoke up ag'in without doin' more harm than good in this community. An' th' other is fur you to take th' hull thing over yoreself an' make things hum. Ol' Sam'l Halliday had his dreams, boy, an' he still has 'em. Sam'l Halliday ain't goin' to depart this life without a-leavin' somethin' lastin' behind 'im. Th' ol' Saucepan's goin to rear up long after I'm dead an' gone, Mat, an' th' smoke from th' ol' smelter's goin' to be a monument to my name. Thar's a fortune layin' almost idle thar, Mat, an' thar's only two descendants as is a-goin' t'have the leavin's o' Sam'l Halliday. Them two is you an' my daugther, Sally, up in Denver."

"I don't wanta horn in on any o' Sally's prospects," spoke up Mat. "I'm willin' to do my share; but it might be thet Sally's husband 'ud be a good man, more business-like, as y'might say, than I am."

"Sally's husband better stay right thar in Denver, whar he belongs," said Halliday. "He's a business-man, thet's right, but minin's a head diff'rent from most businesses. I'm sorter countin' on you, Mat."

Nelson listened seriously to the outlining of his uncle's plans.

"Waal, Uncle Sam," he said, finally, "I reckon as how y'ain't goin' to be disapp'inted in me. Not ef I kin help it!"

IT was not a boast. It was merely a heartfelt reaction of loyalty and a promise to carry out uncle's fondest hopes and dreams.

"Put 'er thar, Mat!" said Halliday, extending a veined hand to his nephew, and

shaking heartily on the young man's reassurance. "I knowed thet you'd stay with me. An' as I said, you've made a right royal beginnin' fur th' start. Plug Keffer's in jail, awaitin' trial an' execution fur murder. Ol' Jason Flint is back onto his feet ag'in, assertin' authority as it should be asserted, an' Clem Torry's aimin' t' find hisself with his back ag'in' th' wall. It's high time to git into operation on them plans I had fur th' Saucepan, for I reckon this town has seen the worst an' is on the mend. The Saucepan, th' new Saucepan, 'ull make this town."

Mat Nelson was silent. His uncle generally knew what he was talking about. He knew mining, at any rate. But Mat, although he was far from an egotistical young man, believed that his uncle and Jim Lemmon and other men much older than himself and much longer in Spring Green, were blind to certain developments taking place about them, and which he, in town for only a short time, had seen. They had brains and vision of sorts, and had amassed more money than he himself would ever amass by his own efforts during his life, he reflected, but they were of the old régime. They had made a great, almost lifelong game of mining, and would be as loath to be weaned away and turned toward any other big commercial game as a confirmed poker player would be loath to turn to some new-fangled pastime.

At the right time he would speak to his uncle of a newer and bigger possibility which might put Spring Green on the railroad and the map. But the time to tell his uncle was not yet. He planned a little quiet investigation before speaking.

One-Gun made a habit of riding many miles about the territory surrounding Spring Green. As Clem Torry had surmised, Mat was not unaware of the possibilities of oil as a source of fortune.

With only twenty-five years back of him, Mat had no preconceived prejudices against the developments which would some day raise many Westerners from comparative poverty to millionairedom. Nelson saw romance and action and future a-plenty in black gold—in oil.

While not allowing his mind to stray very far from the plans mapped out by his uncle regarding the Saucepan Mine, he still browsed about for evidence that one day might drive Clem Torry and his adherents from Spring Green; he sensed that to undermine Torry and his ilk, the best method would be to get at the roots which bound them to Spring Green.

From Mat's keen observation of the surrounding territory he had decided that it was oil and oil alone, which rooted the Torry gang to the community.

Riding back into town one afternoon, One-Gun stopped to look at the "Railroad Station." He smiled. But it was a smile of appreciation rather than of ridicule. The station was there, but no railroad. The station stood there, in Mat's eyes, as a monument to the ever-forward dreams of man.

A little farther on, near the middle of town but off a bit to the north, stood an unfinished building of red brick. Its bulk stood out in this town of wood like an armory in a lumber-yard. This square-sided, unfinished building represented another dream. As Ed Grove had told him, there had been a time when Spring Green had shown such promise of rapid growth that a mayor and official retinue seemed to loom in the near distance.

In anticipation of this time, the forward citizenry had voted the building of a city hall, to await occupancy which would come as soon as the structure was completed and their ambitious civic plans took place.

Things had taken a backward step in Spring Green, however. The mine had seemed to peter out, the smelter had become practically idle and the stamp-mill silent; everybody in the region had less to spend, comparative hard times swept along, and it had been impossible to finish the building. Samuel Halliday's purse had helped to finish it temporarily by topping it with a roof of tar, and it now awaited the day of completion and tenure. It was referred to as the City Hall. But at present its only use was as a jail.

AND at present, as One-Gun sat on Silver Dollar surveying the red hulk, Plug Keffer stretched his great, chastened person upon a narrow cot within the cell, the only occupant of officialdom's domain, and an occupant awaiting trial for the crime of crimes—murder.

Thoughtfully, Mat started to lope along, pulled up in front of the Railroad Café, and dismounted. This was a good time to have a little talk with the Groves, or Carter Meadows. He often had hoped to meet Meadows, and have a talk with him.

But, as it happened, just the idle days that he had waited for Meadows in the Railroad Café, something more important, or at least more full of action, had occurred.

"Howdy, Miss Grove," he said, taking a seat with her at a table, after he had greeted her father. "Jes' thought I'd drop in. No, ain't hungry right at present; I figured mebbe on gittin' a little information on this Carter Meadows feller. He don't go 'round talkin' much, like th' rest o' the gang. An' it strikes me as how these silent men's the ones as have th' most important things t'say."

"I'll tell you, Mr. Nelson," spoke up Dorothy. "Mr. Meadows is not at all like the rest of the folks in this town. He came here less than a year ago. We got friendly—somewhat," she modified blushingly, as though the statement might be misconstrued, "because people who are different are always interesting. It took about two months before he began to talk openly to me, and I reckon that he's told me more about himself than he's told anybody else."

"He's an Easterner, I reckon, Miss Grove."

"Yes, he was educated back in Omaha. He tried practising there for a while, but the city was overcrowded with lawyers, and besides he wanted a change of scenery and climate. He's not a husky man, and he wanted to get down here away from the heavy Nebraska winters.

"After traveling about through the southwest," she continued, "he decided to settle in Spring Green, chiefly because there was only one lawyer here. Judge Daniels had retired, practically, and had gone to live over near Trinchera. He got tired of the lawlessness of this town."

"That reminds me," said Mat. "Sher'f Flint's ridin' over thar to see th' jedge either this afternoon or this evenin'. He's minded to speed up Keffer's trial."

"I hope he does," said Dorothy. And then, returning to the subject of Meadows, "The one lawyer here, you see, was Wade, who was not exactly a young man. Moreover, Mr. Meadows thought he saw good times coming ahead, as he told me, and it looked as if Spring Green, with the Saucepan running full tilt again, might take a new lease on life and grow rapidly.

"Of course, being a gentleman, it was only right of him to have a talk with Wade. And Wade, always tricky as you know, talked him into going into business with him instead of opening up a competing office. Meadows had no friends here then, and didn't know, of course, that he would have had very little competition from Wade. All the good people in town hate the sight of Wade, and would have been glad to take their business to an up and coming new man. That's the pity of it all. Meadows didn't quite understand."

"I RECKON Wade has plenty of other business, not inside the law, but outside, as y' might say," put in Mat.

"Yes, but Carter is positively in on none of that," the girl declared. "He was taken in by that gang over there, they're right smooth, and it seems that Meadows even yet won't believe the extent to which he is being used as a tool by that bunch. Meadows is glad to run for sheriff because he thinks it will give him a good opportunity to make a start in politics. He's interested in politics. He thinks that this is destined to be a quiet town, more advanced than certain other western settlements, and that a hard-riding, straight-shooting type of sheriff is unnecessary. He points out that Flint hasn't shot at a man in years. He doesn't believe, however, that this town would have been a lot better off if Jase Flint had been more self-assertive and quicker on the trigger."

"Yaas, I reckon yo're right in thet partic'lar," Mat agreed. "Thieves is like weeds. Let 'em git a start on you, an' purty soon they spread thick an' perfuse-like. Git 'em out early, an' you ain't got so much to do later. Waal, I take yore word on this Meadows feller, Miss Grove, an' we'll see what we all kin do 'bout it."

"I do wish you could help him," said Dorothy, impulsively. "It certainly is a shame to see all of his talents go to waste, especially where real talent is scarce, and needed."

"Th' first thing necessary," said Mat, "'ud be to see thet them talents o' his ain't put to evil purposes just on account o' bein' missed, y'might say.

"Meadows might be pleased," he continued, rising, "t' git elected as sher'f, but it ain't for nothin' thet Torry an' Wade is backin' him. I'm afeard they got Meadows sorter bull-dozed, an' mebbe aim to git him in as sher'f 'fore Plug Keffer goes to trial. Th' hull town's a-cryin' fur it anyhow, t' come off immediate. I'm goin' to mosey over to Jason Flint now, an' see

jest how soon Keffer kin be airin' hisself at th' end of a rope. Good-day, Miss Grove."

Nelson peeped into "The Bank" for Flint, but for once that official was not at his favorite haunt. Keffer had been in jail three days now, and probably Flint was keeping closer to the jail. He finally found Flint at the square, red building. The officious Jason was laying down the law to a deputy, sitting guard near the cell of Keffer.

"Thought you was ridin' over Trinchera way," he said to Flint.

"I aimed to," said the sheriff. "Fact, I think I'll start lopin' along right now. Ef yo're ridin' up toward yore uncle's house, I'd admire to ride along of you."

"Shore," said One-Gun. "An' why not stop in fur supper? Uncle Sam 'ud be glad to have you, an' we could talk things over."

Flint accepted the invitation and the two rode toward the Halliday home. Clem Torry, Mat learned, had gone out of town the morning before and hadn't been seen back as yet. Possibly, thought Nelson, he must have been fearful that the town's cry for a speedy trial would be harmful to Keffer's safety, and perhaps Torry had skipped out to try to rig up some legal delays.

As the two riders reached the Halliday home, the sun was already setting. Manuel was already busy in the kitchen in the midst of some tantalizing odors from pans and skillets, and a few moments later the three men sat down to supper.

"I'm hopin'," said Flint, as he did full justice to the various dishes prepared by Manuel, "thet Jedge Daniels'll see it my way for a quick trial. Then everything shore'll be hunky-dory. Once Keffer's danglin' an' dancin' on th' air, I reckon it won't be long 'fore Spring Green perks up an' gits plumb orderly."

"I hope so, an' I reckon it will," agreed Halliday.

While Manuel might not have passed as a chef in most communities where the finer delicacies are served to discriminating diners, he was good enough for Spring Green. Jason gorged himself plentifully, and sat picking his teeth with a broken fingernail.

"Jes' as soon I didn't have to make thet ride over to Trinchera," he said, lolling back.

"Tell you what I'll do. I'll ride 'long of you," offered Nelson.

FIFTEEN minutes later, in the gathering dusk, the two riders set out for the home of Judge Daniels. The route to Trinchera lay along the slight rise from which, on his first day in town, Mat had seen the treachery of Clem Torry in planting a sniper to get him in the event of a gun-fight, and then the trail crossed Pueblo Creek and continued on a short distance from the railroad.

The night was dark, but the moon had come out. It illuminated the trail ahead in a pattern of black and silver, and stars twinkled here and there in the sky.

The trail paralleled the railroad for perhaps a mile, and then, still following the general direction of the creek but shooting away from the railroad, made an almost semi-circular loop down gradually toward the hollow where the little ghost-town of Trinchera was located. Trinchera, however, was not a deserted town. A few persistent miners still clung to its rim, thinking of the boom times when they had first come to this community, when there was a dance hall and money and revelry. Judge Daniels, who had moved over from Spring Green, was said to be doing a little placer mining on the side.

One-Gun thought of these things as, with Sheriff Flint at his side, he rode along directly toward the moon which seemed to be hanging over Trinchera. The riders completed the semi-circular turn to the right, and Mat looked dreamily over his left shoulder at the orb of light in the sky. How many times would that moon rise again before Plug Keffer dangled from a rope?

The trail made a bend again. Now it would descend straight into Trinchera. The moon could now be seen almost straight ahead again, through the clump of cottonwood trees that bordered the Trinchera trail.

Silver Dollar lifted his head; his nostrils quivered, and he gave vent to a low whicker. A few rods ahead were the cottonwood trees. One-Gun put up his hand as a signal to Flint. He lowered his head, and listened. From the direction of the cottonwoods, there was a muffled sort of sound. Mat, used to horses since childhood, thought that it might have been the nicker of a horse. But the sound came

sort of throttled—as if a man, fearing an answering neigh from his mount, might have held his fingers over his horse's nose.

"Jase," said Mat, in a low tone. "Thet sorter sounds to me—"

The sentence was never finished. Just ahead, in against the black weft of the trees, there was a flash, and throwing up his hands, Sheriff Jason Flint toppled from his horse into the road and lay motionless, his dead eyes staring at the sky.

His horse reared, stampeded over to the side of Silver. There was another flash ahead and a report, and the animal, now just in front of One-Gun, gave a squeal of pain. But it did not fall. It turned away from the cottonwoods and galloped frantically up the slight slope back toward Spring Green.

Mat, however, had not been idle. Almost before the report of the rifle broke the night's stillness, his six-gun had been whipped from his holster and he was firing at the flashes up among the cottonwoods. When the fourth rifle-shot came, he felt a sting in the left shoulder, but he kept shooting at the flashes.

He spurred Silver Dollar, who raced down the slope toward the clump of trees. There was another flash ahead, and as he saw it One-Gun fired. It was his last cartridge, but one.

One-Gun felt like what seemed a crushing weight fall on his head, and his temple burned as if someone were searing it with a red-hot iron. His horse was still galloping under the smart of the unaccustomed rowel, but for once its rider was not a part of the animal.

The rider's head sank forward, his weapon fell from his hand, and One-Gun toppled into the roadway.

CHAPTER X

BIG ED GROVE smoked a cigar in front of the Railroad Café while he engaged Carter Meadows in casual conversation. He towered over the frail young lawyer who had ambitions to be sheriff, and he looked over the lawyer's head, seemingly peering into the darkness up along the main street.

"Somebody ridin' hard," he said. "Hear them hoof beats, Carter? I dunno who'd be lopin' hell-bent like that jest at present. Course, Nelson lives up thet way. I wonder what's up."

Carter Meadows turned and gazed in the same direction. Out of the semi-gloom of the upper end of the little main street raced a riderless horse. The stirrups twisted and swung as the wild-eyed sorrel streaked along, and Ed Grove ran out into the middle of the street, and waved his arms.

Big Ed made a grasp at the bridle, and missed it, but a man walking along the street from the direction of "The Bank" had also run into the road and managed to check the now slowing animal. The man was Bail-Bond Wade.

The horse pranced and minced about, and Wade led it toward the light in front of the Pacific Pool-Room and peered at it. A number of men had run out of the pool-hall, and several were crossing now from "The Bank."

"He's been clipped on the muzzle," Wade remarked. "Something irregular here, I'm afraid. That's Jase Flint's horse, isn't it?"

"It shore is," replied one of the bystanders.

Big Ed Grove and Carter Meadows had run down the street and joined the knot of men around the animal.

"Jase Flint rode by the place on thet hoss early this evenin'," he said to the bystanders. "He was with One-Gun Nelson. I reckoned he'd figgered to ride over to Trinchera, seein' Jedge Daniels 'bout somethin'."

"I seen 'em, too," put in a youth who had run from the pool-hall, cue in hand. "'Twas 'bout four o'clock, I reckon." He pointed up the street. "Here comes Sam'l Halliday," he said. "Mebbe he'll have somethin' to tell us."

Samuel Halliday galloped along the street and dismounted at the edge of the crowd. "What's up?" he asked.

"That's what we were wondering," said Wade. "We thought maybe you might have something to tell us."

"All I know," said Halliday, "is that I was talkin' to Jim Lemmon in front o' my house, an' this hoss raced aroun' the turn. We was too late to head 'im off, but we knowed somethin' was up. I had my hoss standin' there, an' I galloped down to see ef he was caught. Golly!" He had seen the blood on the horse's muzzle. "B'en plugged, too. Jase had supper with me an' my nephew, an' then th' both of 'em started over toward Trinchera way." His voice showed his concern. "Somethin'

mighty wrong here. I'm startin' up th' trail toward Trinchera. Jim Lemmon's saddlin' up, an' I reckon he'll jine me."

"But wait a minute, thar, Sam'l," commanded Big Ed Grove, "No use one or two o' you startin' out. I'll be ready to jine you in two shakes."

"An' me, too," put in Wade.

"I'll go along," Carter Meadows volunteered.

"Me, too," came more than one voice from the crowd, and there was a dash toward the hitch-rail of "The Bank."

It was a matter of only minutes before a sizable group of riders, most of them armed, and one carrying a lantern, rode up the main street toward the Trinchera trail for a couple of miles. They met Jim Lemmon clattering toward town, and the gaunt ex-miner joined the cavalcade.

"I wouldn't fret too much," he took occasion to tell his friend, Halliday. "Yore nephew was along of Flint, wa'n't he?"

"Yep," answered Halliday. "But it all looks wrong t' me."

His seamed old face was pale, and there was a worried look in the faded old eyes. Bail-Bond Wade rode over close beside him.

"Yore nephew started out with Flint, you say?" he asked.

Halliday looked up. "Yep," he said, briefly. "We got a right smart heap o' prominent citizens here," he added. Then, as if it might be an afterthought:

"I don't see Clem Torry here."

"No," said Wade, calmly. "I got a letter from Clem today. He's down San Miguel way, getting rigged out with some new clothes."

"Yep," said Halliday.

THE cavalcade crossed the creek and rattled on to cross the railroad, then turned along the Trinchera trail. Samuel Halliday rode at the front of the procession, his old face set in hard lines. The man with the lantern bent down and let its rays illuminate the hoof-pocked trail. "They shore passed here," he observed. "Them's new hoofprints, an' you kin see the marks o' Flint's hoss on th' back trail."

Halliday was silent. Something irregular had happened, that much was certain. His nephew had been with Flint, and Flint's riderless horse had stampeded back into Spring Green, and there had been a bullet-mark in its muzzle. There had been gun-play of some sort. Had his nephew been in it? And Mat must have seen the sheriff's horse bolt. If something serious had not happened why had not Mat followed up the horse and caught him before the animal reached Spring Green?

He saw Bail-Bond Wade loosen his reins and allow his animal to break to the head of the procession. Was Bail-Bond sincere in being a part of this detachment tonight? Had he misjudged Bail-Bond in the past, or had Bail-Bond simply come along tonight for the looks of the matter?

The cavalcade approached the semi-circle loop away from the railroad, and gradually made the turn and started the slight slope around the trail which then would lead toward the hollow of Trinchera. They made the final bend. The moon had climbed over the top of the cottonwoods ahead; its light streamed down along the trail. Suddenly the horse of Bail-Bond Wade shied.

"Steady there, y'old fool!" yelled Wade. "What's up?"

But the sharp old eyes of Samuel Halliday had made out a dark smudge in the moonlit trail a few yards ahead. His old heart was pounding. He spurred his horse. He could hear the clattering hoofs of Wade's horse behind him.

A body lay on its back in the middle of the road. Halliday and Wade looked down at it.

"Lord! It's poor Jase Flint!" exclaimed Wade. "Plugged! Plugged right through the heart."

The rear riders clattered up. "By God! Murder!" ejaculated Big Ed Grove, as he gazed down at the dead face of the sheriff. "Pore ol' Jase! Waal, I knowed Jase a mighty long time. I reckon he didn't have no chanst to go fur his gun, but he died th' way he allus said he wanted to die with his boots on! Pore ol' Jase!"

But already one of the riders who had advanced to the start of the second turn had yelled and waved back and pointed along the trail.

All except Ed Grove and one or two others who had dismounted spurred their animals and overtook the rider as he rounded the turn.

A few rods ahead, between them and the clump of cottonwood trees, the figure of a horse was outlined in the white moonlight. There was an unconscious cry of anguish from Samuel Halliday. It was a

blaze-faced horse—Silver Dollar. And he was standing in such a way as to mask something in the middle of the road. The ex-miner could make out a pair of boots projecting beyond the horse's feet.

Halliday's rowel bit into the flank of his horse. In a few seconds he had dismounted and led Silver Dollar a foot or two away. A tall form was lying in the roadside face down. The faithful blaze-face had not deserted his master.

There was a choking gasp from the throat of Samuel Halliday.

"Mat! Mat!" he called piteously. "Aw, Mat!"

Bail-Bond Wade had stooped down and turned over the form.

There were moistened eyes in many a hard, rough face at that moment. Jim Lemmon had come up and placed a lank arm tenderly about the shoulder of his old pard, Halliday. The man with the lantern was running up. He shed the rays full upon the bloody face of One-Gun Nelson; which was unevenly stained, as though the warm tongue of Silver Dollar had washed away some of the gore.

There was a spasmodic flutter of Mat's eyelids. "Lor' be praised!" called Jim Lemmon. "Sam'l! Sam'l, ol' pard! Mebbe—jes' mebbe—we ain't too late yit!"

The voice seemed to cut into the ears of Nelson. He half-raised his head, and his blood-blinded eyes stared up toward the spot of light from the lantern.

"Did I git 'im?" he asked. "Did I git 'im?"

His head sank back again, and he lay still.

BIG ED GROVE had seemingly taken charge of things. He turned to a trio of the horsemen.

"We're a heap nearer Trinchera than we are t' Spring Green," he said. "Two or three o' yo' boys ride hell-fur-leather into Trinchera. Ef thar's a doc thar, hev him gallop out. An' one o' yo' boys git hold of a buckboard pronto. This here boy cain't be got in thar no other way. We'll git 'im into Trinchera, an' you two, Okey an' Reeve, ride back to Spring Green. Rouse up ol' Doc Travers, in case thar ain't no doc at Trinchera

"An' say, work fast, an' mebbe it'll be so thar's only b'en one murder tonight. This lad's been creased bad, an' he's b'en plugged through th' shoulder. Don't you fret too much, Sam'l, ol' boy," he added, patting the shoulder of Halliday, who was kneeling in the dust of the roadway over the unconscious form of his nephew.

"Git started, boys," he commanded, turning to the men he had designated. "Rouse up Trinchera, an' get some sorter posse started over toward the desert, so' the ornery rattler thet did this don't git too much head start. Or he may still be prowlin' aroun' 'twixt here an' Trinchera. Ef you see anybody suspicious, bring 'im back. An' say, boys. Remember, we ain't got no sher'f right at present. Pore Jase is dead. So tote along a rope!"

CHAPTER XI

CLEM TORRY, handsomely bedecked in a new suit of store-clothes and a brand new sombrero, cantered along the trail, which paralleled the railroad, on his trim stallion which looked as though it might be of Arabian lineage.

The sun was hot at this point, and Torry stopped for a moment to remove his sombrero and mop the perspiration from his forehead.

Down along the shimmering trail he could see the crossboard sign beside the railroad tracks. He wondered what had happened in Spring Green during his five days' absence. He wondered if a certain party assigned to a certain task had done his duty and earned his money.

For that had been the real reason for Clem Torry's absence from Spring Green. The ostensible reason for his trip had been the new outfit and some personal business of a financial nature, down in San Miguel. He would show great surprise when, on coming into Spring Green, he would be informed that someone had got Sheriff Jason Flint. Clem Torry would show a sort of a speechless sorrow. He had never had any run-ins with Flint; Flint had been easy to handle at all times. Clem Torry would be among those to cry loudly for vengeance.

It might be, of course, that the man he had hired had turned yellow, or had not had a chance to get Flint when the latter rode over to Judge Daniels, as Torry knew that he planned to do. In that case, things would be at least as good as they were before. Flint had been practically the only eye-witness to the Gelder killing, except, of course, One-Gun. With Flint out of

the way, leave the rest to the wily legal mind of Wade. Flint, at least, would have been the only witness generally regarded as neutral. The whole community knew that Mat and Keffer had had a bitter man-to-man tussle and that there had been blood between them. If Flint, the neutral witness, was out of the way, he and Wade had a good chance to get Keffer free.

Or, in case even that failed, Wade had said something about getting the election for sheriff shoved forward through Judge Daniels of Trinchera. Once they managed to get little Meadows in, he and Wade would be sitting soft. There were all sorts of ways. He and Wade had been pretty smooth in everything they did; no one in the wrong camp had anything definite on them; and if the time came when they did, well, Clem Torry could pull out of Spring Green to spend his fortune in more interesting places.

Thus ran Clem Torry's thoughts as his stallion plodded across the railroad tracks and turned down the trail that led into Spring Green.

Clem Torry's thoughts came to an abrupt conclusion as the trail led him to the lower part of the main street of Spring Green. Up along the street he could see little groups of men, standing around and talking. He sensed an air of bustle that was unusual in Spring Green.

A man drew by in a Canastoga wagon. He looked like a rancher returning to his home in the fertile valley to one side of the town. Torry did not recognize him, but he pulled up his horse.

"What's goin' on up there?" he asked. "Looks like excitement?"

THE stranger stopped his horses. "Shore is," he said. "Right smart excitement today, 'lection!"

"Election!" echoed Torry. "What election?"

"Sher'f," was the reply.

"But Jase Flint's term ain't up yet."

"Yep, I reckon it is," was the reply. "Mebbe y'ain't from these parts, stranger. Ef you was, you'd know thet Jase Flint was shot daid by an orn'ry murderer. Ol' Jase's orfice is bein' filled today, by 'lection."

"Good God!" exclaimed Torry. "Yes, I am from here, but I've been away. I knew Jase. One o' the best friends I had. Killed! Good God!"

"They'll tell y'all about it," said the rancher, as he clucked to his horses. "Giddap, thar! Yep, some 'un got Jase Flint an' that feller called One-Gun Nelson. Yo're goin' t' hear a mighty excitin' story, stranger!"

Clem Torry cantered up the main street. He had half-expected to hear about the sniping of Flint, that was according to plan. But One-Gun Nelson dead, too! Had his hireling gone too far beyond instructions? Was it a good thing or a bad thing? Would it mean that everything would now be plain sailing for Wade and himself, with Nelson out of the way? Or would the thing look too obvious? No one would suspect him in connection with the Flint killing. But it was known that he and Nelson were enemies. He had better get to Wade at once, and see the lay of the land.

He felt a little nervous as he proceeded up the street toward the office of Wade and Meadows, nodding here and there but not stopping. He wanted to talk with Wade first. He threw his reins over his horse's head, clattered up the wooden stairs of the law office and threw open the door.

Wade was holding a paper in his hand and discussing it with Carter Meadows. Torry looked at Wade significantly. Wade's poker-face remained expressionless.

"Howdy, Clem," he said, quietly. "See you been getting all rigged out down in San Miguel. Well, a lot's happened since you've been away. Come back in here, I'll tell you all about it."

As he passed into the rear of the suite, Torry felt strangely nervous. He sat down as Wade slammed the door and winked over at him.

"Gi' me it quick, Wade," he said. "What's up? And what about the election being held today? That sure was a surprise. I met a rancher down the road a piece, an' he told me about the election, and"—unconsciously he lowered his voice—"about Flint an' Nelson. The fellow that got him—" He winked at Wade. "Did he get away from Spring Green?"

"He's still in Spring Green," said Wade, coolly. "Or right nearby, that is."

"What happened? Did they know he got Flint an' Nelson? Has he talked?"

"He's in Boot Hill," said Wade.

"You got me wrong. I don't mean Flint or Nelson, I mean the one that got 'em."

"I got you right," said Wade, with his

almost irritating calmness. "He's in Boot Hill, six feet underground. He won't talk."

"Dead is he? How did they get him? Rope necktie? Posse? What?"

"Our prominent and helpful friend, One-Gun Nelson, got him," Wade informed his crony. "And what do you mean about Flint and One-Gun being in Boot Hill? Flint, yes. Jase Flint was buried yesterday. But Nelson, damn his tough hide, is a long way above ground.

"Here," he continued, looking over at the now disappointed face of Clem Torry. "Don't cross-examine me. I'll tell you the whole thing from start to finish. Sheriff Jason Flint was shot and killed, presumably by some old enemy of his. Flint and Nelson were riding toward Trinchera. It was night. The same man got Nelson in the shoulder and also creased him with a bullet in the temple. But Nelson, according to his story, fired at the flashes.

"WHEN Jase Flint's riderless horse came streaking into town, a bunch of us citizens—I was among 'em—rode out Trinchera way to see what happened. We found Flint dead in the roadway, about two thirds of the way between here and Trinchera. We found One-Gun there too. He was unconscious, and we got him on a buckboard and into Trinchera, and Doc Travers rode over and dressed his wounds. Nelson was a long way from being dead, but Travers has made him stay over there. He's making a good recovery—expected back today, I reckon.

"At first I was afraid—well, all of us thought that whoever did the shooting had made a getaway or might be around the country somewhere. But Nelson had been shooting at the flashes and whatever One-Gun Nelson shoots at, he hits."

"He's a lucky, nine-lived cat!"

"Anyhow," continued Wade, "the boys combed the country for a long way past Trinchera. Then, next morning, this fellow that did the shooting was found in a clump of cottonwoods on the Trinchera trail, his rifle in his hands. He'd been plugged in the chest and a couple of times in the belly, and probably bled to death. Anyhow, he's dead—and buried—and if anybody planted him there," he added, again winking at Torry, "that person has nothing to worry about. Dead men tell no tales."

Clem Torry emitted an elephantine sigh. He got up, and opened a corner cupboard and took out a tall bottle. Wade shook his head. "None for me—today," he said. "I'm going to be right busy."

Clem poured himself a generous drink, and drained the glass.

"An' of course you got the special election held," he said.

"Of course. It was a golden opportunity. I got together a group of ranchers from the west of the county, and also a group of townsmen. I put it up strong to Judge Daniels. Most people take his word on such special occasions, and you know I could always handle Daniels. Grove and Lemmon and plenty others were for Nelson to fill the shoes of the late Sheriff Flint. I got the right people to point out—that was two days ago—that Nelson was a badly injured man, that he might even die. He was in a fever for thirty-six hours.

"It finally worked out that the candidates would be Meadows, of course, and Jake Eddy, who's been a deputy for years. I knew there'd be a battle. I got the ballots printed that way, though, and if anybody wants Nelson for sheriff they'll have to write in his name. That gave us an edge right there. Two out of three will vote for one or the other man whose name's printed on the ticket."

Torry stood up and stretched out his hand to Wade. "If my hat wasn't already off," he said, "I'd take it off to you. You always have an ace in the hole, Wade."

"I have another," said Wade, smugly. "Ed Grove, Jim Lemmon, Doc Travers, Rush Merrill, an' a good-sized bunch o' the boys rode over to Trinchera today. They're bringing back Nelson. They got a spring wagon, to make it easy for him over that trail, and I reckon they plan on some grandstand play to bring him back to town with a lot of noise before the polls close. But Rush, of course, is with us. They think the polls close at four o'clock, and Rush'll do everything over there to keep alive that impression. But what did I do? Got an order signed just this noon, signed by Judge Daniels, the chairman commissioner satisfactory to all sides, that the polls close at two o'clock. If there would be any danger from a grandstand play like that, this order fixes it. When they get back, it'll be too late for all of 'em to vote. And if there's any flareback, if they blame anybody, let 'em blame Judge

Daniels. I think we've got a little sheriff in that outside office, Clem," he added, smiling and nodding in the direction where Meadows was at work in the front office.

Clem Torry took another drink of whisky, and shook his great head admiringly. "Wade," he said, "I reckon if you an' me goes to Hell when we die, we won't have much to worry about. You'd sorta maneuver the Devil aroun' an' git his job, an' I reckon we might find it right pleasant down there."

Wade smiled at the appreciation of his confederate.

"You're talking about some time in the future, Clem," he said. "We're going to do quite a little living first. And tonight, when Meadows is counted in as sheriff, we're sitting on top of the world."

CHAPTER XII

ALONG a narrow road that sloped up from the hollow of Trinchera rode a group of horsemen. They looked like outriders in the old coaching days, for some of them rode in advance of a covered spring wagon, and some rode behind, and there was a festive air about the procession. There was a banner across the side of the covered spring wagon, a banner which read: FOR SHURUFF. OUR CANDYDATE, O. G. NELSON.

Mat Nelson, out of deference to his recent gun-wounds, rode in the spring wagon, and Samuel Halliday held the reins. This deputation of Spring Green citizens had ridden over to Trinchera that morning, planning to conduct their candidate for office personally back to Spring Green. It was a gesture of whole-hearted liking for Mat and at the same time one planned to make his entrance into Spring Green, on the day of election, somewhat of a gala affair.

The procession would reach Spring Green around two o'clock, and Halliday and his fellow citizens were of the belief that the polls did not close until four. In fact, Rush Merrill, who was a member of the party, volunteered the opinion that there would be plenty of time to reach Spring Green—no use, he averred, speeding up and rattling up the wounded Nelson.

As the party reached the top of the sloping hill crowned by the cottonwood trees, it was Rush Merrill who seemed very eager to learn about the particulars of the ambushing there by the strange sniper a few nights before. Merrill dismounted, and asked Mat various questions, complimented the puncher on his courage and marksmanship, and—at one time when he was exploring the ground in the clump of cottonwoods, he pulled out a great silver watch from a pocket of his deerskin vest and consulted the hour. It was a little after twelve o'clock, noon. At this rate, the party would not reach Spring Green before two o'clock, the actual closing-time of the polls. And Rush Merrill, helper of Wade and Torry, would do all the stalling possible to make the party's tardiness a certainty.

As the procession reached the loop-like turn in the Trinchera trail, a horseman could be seen traveling with some speed from the direction of Spring Green. His horse galloped, and then cantered, and then galloped again, and then slowed to a walk. Even at a distance, it could be seen that this man was no experienced Western rider. The mystery was explained when the rider drew within distance to be recognized, and proved to be Carter Meadows.

Ed Grove was the first to recognize him. "A leetle onusual, ain't it, Carter?" he greeted. "I ain't never seen you astride of a hoss before."

"Well, I'm learning to ride a little," said Meadows as he sat his horse. Rush Merrill looked up questioningly at Meadows, as if trying to catch the lawyer's eye for some possible message from Wade or Torry. But it was at Halliday and Mat that Meadows looked.

"I just happened to hear something a while ago that might interest you gentlemen," he said. "May I ask what hour you understand that the polls close in Spring Green?"

"Four o'clock!" piped up Rush Merrill.

"I was under the impression that you gentlemen thought that," he said. "That's the reason I rode over to give you the real facts. The polls close at two o'clock this afternoon."

"It cain't be," objected Merrill. "Are you shore sartin?"

"Quite certain," replied Meadows. "I happened to be in the office when Judge Daniels came in. I received my information direct from him. I had heard, also, that you gentlemen planned to arrive back in town in time to vote, and that you might be under the wrong impression as to the closing hour. You have a political rival of

mine here, but I don't care to win anything by trickery. I got a horse and rode over to meet you, to speed you up. I believe that Mr. Nelson, in such a position, would do the same for me."

"Yo're darned right he would," came a hearty chorus. And Mat extended his hand.

"I SHORE want to thank you for yore sperrit o' fair play, Meadows," he said. "I b'en wantin' to meet you for some consid'able time, an' the Grove fam'ly has told me more'n once that yo're ace-high. An' now I know it. You look a leetle spent. I'd suggest thet you crawl up here an' ride back with us in the wagon. Yore hoss kin trail along behind."

Carter Meadows, looking somewhat tired after his unaccustomed ride, took advantage of the invitation. He climbed in and sat beside Halliday and Mat. Several of the men of the party seemed sullen now, and suspicious of trickery, and suggested greater speed in getting to Spring Green. Rush Merrill, however, pointed out that they would still probably have time to get there before two—that, if the polls closed at two, he would be allowed to open his bar-room at two, and that he wanted to be there at the opening for increased business from the ranchers who would have ridden into town for the special election.

Meadows, Halliday and Mat found much to talk about during the remainder of the trip into Spring Green. One-Gun found himself liking this frail lawyer, of whom he had heard so many good reports from the Groves, and concerning whom he had kept an open mind until just such an occasion as this when he could talk with Meadows. He was more than ever convinced that Meadows, if he had been a tool of Wade and Torry, had been one unconsciously.

Meadows seemed to have lost his enthusiasm for the office of sheriff of Spring Green. Very probably, in Mat's opinion, he had finally suspected the motives of Wade and Torry, or, perhaps, had been convinced of the matter during some recent talk with Dorothy Grove.

"Since that murderous attack upon you and Jase Flint the other night," Meadows remarked, "I'm rather convinced that, after all, this town might need a hard-riding, straight-shooting sheriff. I hadn't thought so at first, on account of Flint's tolerant methods. I'm beginning to believe that perhaps I'm not the type. I assure you that it is not cowardice on my part that has helped to form this indifference of mine toward the office. It's a matter of practicality."

"Course it ain't. Course it ain't!" One-Gun agreed. He believed that he knew a coward when he saw one.

"No man's a coward," said One-Gun heartily, "that'll ride over like this to tip off a rival in the sperrit o' fair play 'specially when by doin' it you sorter'd antagonize, as y' might say, an hombre like Clem Torry."

"I assure you that I have no fear of Clem Torry," said Meadows, quietly. "All Torry means to me is a client for whom I have handled certain interests, and he is also an intimate of my partner. That is all."

"I reckoned at first, Meadows," Mat said, quite frankly, "thet you'd make an all-fired pore sher'f. I've changed my mind. I figger now thet you'd make an almighty good 'un. Ef yo're elected, thar'll be no bad feelin' on my part, I'll say thet right now!"

"It might be a good idea," suggested Meadows, "for some of your men to gallop on and at least see if they won't be in time to vote, before the polls close."

It was finally agreed that a number of the riders gallop on to Spring Green and see if Judge Daniels could not be influenced to change the closing hour of the polls from two o'clock to three. Some of the riders were loud in their claims that the matter would be done legally or with force, and that six-guns might add force to their arguments for fairness.

Halliday and Nelson tried to tone down the attitudes of their companions but as the men rode away, headed by Jim Lemmon, Mat believed that the men would make a noisy afternoon of it in Spring Green.

BY the time the covered spring wagon, with its small remaining escort of horsemen and with Halliday, Meadows and One-Gun on the seat, passed the sign-post near the railroad and turned up the trail that crossed Pueblo Creek not far from town, it was apparent that they would have a narrow squeeze to reach the center of town before two.

As they passed the Grove property, Mat was minded to ask Big Ed Grove if he had sold out to Clem Torry.

"I ain't sold yit," Ed replied, "but I reckon I will. Th' prop'ty ain't much good without a house t' live in. Torry gi' me a hunderd dollar deposit, what he called eveedence o' good will, but it ain't bindin' yit."

"How much did he offer?" asked Mat.

"Twelve hunderd dollar. Right good offer."

"I'll give you fifteen hunderd," said Nelson. And the bargain with the surprised Ed Grove was sealed right there.

"I'm gittin' th' best of it," said Grove, "but it's yore funeral. I reckoned Torry's offer was a right smart 'un."

As the party turned the bend and rolled down the main street, there were evidences of rioting. "The Bank" had been closed, as well as the bar of the Atlantic Hotel, but cattlemen from the valley to the west of the town seemed to have ridden in well supplied with liquor.

"Th' polls is closed," announced a gaunt character, who came to the side of the spring wagon and extended his hand to One-Gun. "Thet is, they say tha'r' closed—but ef they close 'em at two, I'm asseveratin' thet thar's goin' to be trouble." He patted his holsters significantly, and rolled drunkenly down the street.

A noisy demonstration had already been started for One-Gun Nelson.

"Make way fur our next sher'f—One-Gun Nelson!" yelled raucous voices.

"Open them doors to th' polls, y'ornery tricksters!" came another yell. "Thar's citizens here as wants to vote!"

The demonstration increased in momentum. Even the pleadings of One-Gun himself now had but little effect upon the crowd.

From in front of the shed-like building next to "The Bank" surged an angry knot of men as the wagon rolled up. The three men on the seat were in time to hear a crisp warning from inside the building: "Them doors is locked accordin' to law—an' they stay locked."

"To hell with locks!" came the ready challenge. "Smash in the doors, boys. Thar's trickery, an'—"

"The first one to smash through'll be the first one to stop a slug o' lead!" came the warning through the door.

There were loud guffaws from in front of the door, and a few winks were exchanged. An instant later, a half-dozen men hurled their heavy bodies against the wooden door. There was a splitting sound punctuated by a shot. But the human battering-ram continued to pound away.

There was a final racket of straining timbers, and the door went down with a thud, just as another shot sounded from inside the shed, and the sound of tinkling glass came from across the street. The bullet had passed over the men and hit the window of the Pacific Pool-Hall.

And then a spare, white-haired man in black frock coat and wide black hat had stepped from the election shed to the doorway. His white chin whisker stood out straight with the determined poise of his head, and his right hand was raised imperiously. The man was Judge Daniels.

"Quiet, men!" he roared. "Quiet!" He stood there a possible target for a score of guns. His majestic mien and flaunting courage had their effect. The noise ceased except for a few sullen mutterings.

"Gents," he addressed the crowd. "I want to say a word. There's been a lot o' yellin' here. It's whiskey yellin', that's what it is."

There was a snicker at this. Judge Daniels himself had built up a reputation as a drinker as well as a jurist.

"It's whiskey yellin'," continued the white-haired figure. "This here election has been held legal an' fair. That's what you want in Spring Green, ain't it? Just the men I've heard yellin' for it before this are the men that I see tryin' to storm this door."

Which was true. Jim Lemmon and several other usually peaceful citizens were standing there before the door, their six-guns in their hands.

"What are we holdin' this election for?" questioned Judge Daniels. "We're holdin' it for a sheriff. An' what do we want a sheriff for? To preserve order, that's why. You men act more like men of a community that doesn't want a sheriff at all—that wants mob rule. Just the candidate that you men are tryin' to break in here to vote for may be elected already. The ballots are practically counted. Now, hold your heads, gentlemen, I may have some news for you in a second."

He turned his head back into the shed. "Finished up, Lafe?" he asked the man who was counting the votes.

"Jes' countin' th' last ten," came the answer, "an' they're all fur Nelson."

"I'll wait an' make the announcement."

HE waited in the doorway a full two minutes. There was an ominous hush in the group of men in front of the shed. The man referred to as Lafe finally penciled something, got up, and handed a slip of paper to Judge Daniels. The latter referred to it, and held up his hand.

"The announcement I have to make," he said, "is that Carter Meadows has been elected, legal an' fair, to be the sheriff o' Spring Green County. He wins by a plurality o' four votes over Matthew Nelson, an' by forty-nine votes over Jake Eddy. I'd suggest, gentlemen, that you now disperse, an' talk over this election in places besides this. That's all."

There were angry murmurs from the crowd.

"'Tain't squar'!" yelled someone.

"One-Gun 'ud b'en 'lected if we coulda voted," called another.

But Mat himself had now risen from the seat of the spring wagon standing in front of the election shed. His hand weakly gripped the whip-stock for support.

"Quiet, gents," he ordered. "You heard Jedge Daniels, an' ef yo're wise an' law-abidin', yo'll take his advice. I'm th' last man in Spring Green as wants any disorder."

He turned and took the hand of Carter Meadows. "This man—an' he's a friend o' mine—has been elected sher'f," he continued. "An' thet bein' the case, this election is plumb over. I say Carter Meadows is a good man for th' office, an' anybody sayin' diff'rent is callin' Mat Nelson a liar. An' I ain't feelin' none too well; but I ain't feelin' so bad thet I kin be called a liar. I'm askin' you, men, t' give three cheers fur th' new sher'f, Carter Meadows."

The cheers came willingly enough. There was a tremendous din for a moment or two, and several wide hats sailed through the air.

One-Gun sank weakly into the seat of the spring wagon. The excitement and effort had been almost too much for his weakened condition.

"We'd better git along, Mat," suggested Samuel Halliday. "I reckon it won't be well fur you to overdo things fur a spell."

Clem Torry, who, although considerably surprised at seeing Meadows and Nelson together, had cheered the name of the new sheriff, walked up to Judge Daniels in the doorway of the shed. He spoke a few low words to the rough old jurist, who shook his head affirmatively. Then Torry held up his hand.

"Gents o' Spring Green," he said. "Some cringin' c'yote laid low our last sher'f, an' that leaves the office vacant. In other words, we ain't got to do any waitin' for the ex-incumbent to serve out his term. Accordingly, I've suggested to Judge Daniels that he swear in Mr. Carter Meadows at once, and the judge has agreed."

There were more cheers as the slight figure of Carter Meadows leaped from the seat of the spring wagon, followed Torry into the shed, raised his hand and was sworn into office. Judge Daniels pinned the shield of office upon the narrow chest of the new official.

"I'll take the deputy's badge, too, if you please," said Meadows.

He reached in a drawer and drew out a deputy's badge. Then he plowed through the crowd again, this time alone, and stood on the seat of the wagon beside Halliday and Nelson.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the crowd "I thank you for the honor you have bestowed upon me today. I have been elected sheriff, I have sworn to uphold the duties of that office honorably and fairly, and I give you my assurance now that I will uphold that oath.

"At the same time, I realize that I am not the type of man generally selected as a Western sheriff. As you know, I was not born here. But I love this section of ours as much as any of you. There may be certain divisions of the office of Sheriff where another type of man is sometimes necessary, for there is going to be no further lawlessness in Spring Green.

"Accordingly, I think here and now would be a good time to pin the badge of deputy on the breast of a man who deserves it."

He paused. Clem Torry edged expectantly toward the spring wagon. Meadows would hardly deputize Wade, his own law partner. That would look too clannish. So it must be Clem Torry.

"I want you to give him a cheer, boys," said Carter Meadows, taking out the deputy's badge, and poising it in his hand for an instant.

And then the jaw of Clem Torry dropped. Torry was the only silent man in the gathering of men who were sending

up ear-splitting shouts of approbation.

For Carter Meadows was pinning the badge of deputy-sheriff on the breast of One-Gun Nelson.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR once, Clem Torry, a principal in this drama of surprising twists and turns that was taking place in Spring Green, forgot his cue.

In the midst of the cheering over the unexpected appointment of One-Gun as the deputy-sheriff, Torry continued to stand with jaw hanging down and unbelieving eyes leveled with burning hate at Carter Meadows, hitherto the pliable tool in the hands of himself and his crafty partner.

Meadows, however, catching the eyes of his chief—former chief now—did not quail. With a meaningful glance of triumph toward Torry, he planted himself again on the seat beside One-Gun and clicked his tongue at the horses.

"Giddap!" he called to the animals. The wagon started forward up the main street, away from the wildly cheering mob.

Torry turned his head to see Wade, who still was standing on the fringe of the living group. To his utter consernation, Torry saw Bail-Bond Wade, bareheaded, waving his hat in glee with the rest of the boys. Torry stared. What did this mean? Had Bail-Bond Wade also turned against him?

He waited until the crowd gradually dispersed. Torry crossed moodily over to the office of Wade, where he sank into a chair. He heard steps on the wooden stairway, and looked up as the door opened. It was Wade.

"Clem," said Wade, "you surely must have been knocked off your feet by that appointment. Your lower jaw was hardly six inches from your boot-tops."

"And you cheered!" accused Torry.

"And what else would you have me do at the moment? Pull out a six-gun and plug Carter? Of course I cheered. But Clem," he added, "I must admit that I did have an advantage over you. I had a suspicion against Meadows, but I didn't mention it to you because I wanted to see how it would all turn out."

"What was that?" Torry forced a sheepish smile as he caught the logic of Bail-Bond's behavior.

"Early this morning," Wade explained, "I stationed myself behind the booth to see how some of the boys were voting. I wanted to make sure that they were earning their money," he amplified, with an understanding grin. "And this is what I saw through the convenient little peep-hole that just happened to be in the best position for an interested eye: Carter Meadows was among the early voters. He walked in, placed his ballot against the counter, and instead of putting his cross where it would do the most good, he deliberately wrote in the name of Mat Nelson for sheriff! At first I thought it might only be a crazy gesture that the little runt might have thought to be sportsmanship; but I reckon we know better now!"

"This partner o' yours is a dirty, back-floppin' little sidewinder!" spluttered Torry. "And Wade," he continued, "I ain't splittin' hairs to say that Meadows will be better off in Boot Hill alongside his predecessor in office. He'll follow Jason Flint in a hurry! If Meadows is that kind of a sneak, there's no tellin' how much of our business he knows that we don't know he knows. We can't watch Meadows too closely for the next few days."

"We can't be too hasty about Meadows," cautioned Wade. "It wouldn't look just right to have all the snipers in Arizona picking exclusively on the element opposed to the Torry and Wade interests, you know. And, after all, I think I see a lot of light coming through this situation, just as it stands."

"How's that?"

"This way: The fact that One-Gun has stepped on the stage as a deputy-sheriff is going to play right into our hands. Judge Daniels is no fool. If everything came our way, he'd surely get suspicious. But he knows by this time that One-Gun Nelson isn't a favorite with us. One-Gun's appointment will look to Daniels like a bit of fair play on our part, and will lead him to grant me a third favor, whereas otherwise it might be hard to get three favors in a row."

"Anything to do with Plug?" asked Torry.

"PRECISELY! There's a lot of good feeling and atmosphere of fine fellowship prevailing round the town right now, and Judge Daniels is this minute over at 'The Bank' bar, guzzling down the old redeye so dear to his leather stomach. If I go down in a few minutes, after he's had

enough to show the gang he's a hearty good fellow, and ask him to hold Keffer's trial very soon, I think Daniels might do it. In fact, I'll tell Daniels that he won't have to ride back to Trinchera tonight. He can stay over at my place tonight and call Plug Keffer's trial for tomorrow, and get everything over with at one time."

"You're a genius!" declared Torry. "What's the other particular you mentioned?"

"The other matter concerns Nelson. Sniping, as I said, is just about done with under present circumstances. Keffer was charged with being ready to snipe off Nelson once, then along comes an unknown and snipes off Flint and almost lands One-Gun. That looks bad enough without any more. There's a better way to get Nelson."

"An' that is—" queried Torry.

"That is by having him shot dead in a fair and square duel, out in the open, in the presence of witnesses!"

"Wade," said Torry, "there ain't a man in Arizona who can be on his feet after Nelson's hand starts for his holster. I'll go further than that—there ain't a man in these United States of ours, all of 'em, complete an' entire, that could make One-Gun Nelson come off second-best in a man-to-man gunfight. I hate him like poison. But that don't blind me to the facts. No, sir, I don't believe any man in the United States could do it!"

"Then, we'll go out the country for him!"

Torry stared in amazement. "And do you mean to tell me you know such a man?" he asked, incredulously.

"I do!" asserted Wade, with finality. "Clem, the day comes in every man's life when he meets a man who is better than he is. Since every man, no matter how good he is, some day meets his master, so will One-Gun Nelson meet his master. And I know just who his master is."

Torry said nothing—merely shook his head with a dubious air.

"Clem," continued Wade, "the man I refer to began to earn his reputation as a killer while Nelson was probably breaking out of knee breeches. This man was very probably the hero after whom One-Gun patterned his style on the draw. And this man undoubtedly can show Nelson some pointers on rapid drawing and firing that would improve Nelson's style—but it won't improve Nelson in any way if he ever draws on Nelson."

"I never knew you to underrate an enemy before," Torry offered.

"Listen, Clem," said Wade, crisply. "Wait till you hear this. One-Gun is classed as the cock-of-the-walk among the folks of this community. I know a story that they don't. One-Gun once failed to get his man—just wounded him. The fellow recovered, and swore to get Nelson in the future. He boasted about his prowess once too often, however, for it was in the presence of the man I have in mind. The next thing that happened was that the boaster—the man, mind you, that One-Gun couldn't get—lay stretched out stone dead, while the other man went back to the bar and took another drink. This happened only five years ago. As a result of that fight, the man I refer to had a run-in with a sheriff, beat the sheriff to the draw, and that's why right now he's located below the border."

A new interest was apparent in Clem Torry's eyes as Bail-Bond Wade concluded his edifying narrative on the gun-fighter unknown to Torry.

"Who is your man?" he asked eagerly.

"He's called Lightnin' Wilstead," Bail-Bond replied, "and this is a good time to get him here. It was down in Larupo County that he killed the sheriff in a fight that could hardly be called unfair, because the sheriff was drunk and not acting in a legal capacity at the time; he was just baiting Lightnin' and trying to show the crowd that there was one man Lightnin' wouldn't tackle for various reasons. He was wrong; but Lightnin' took no chances and ran for the border. As you know, Larupo County has gone rough again lately, and it just happens that one of Lightnin's old pards is sheriff now. It isn't likely that any warrant against Lightnin' Wilstead would be carried into execution at this time."

CLEM TORRY'S eyes were gleaming with intense interest. "If he's as good as you say," he said, "he's more important in Spring Green right now than the President of the United States. But how come you never mentioned him before?"

"After thirty odd years of legal practice," said Bail-Bond Wade, "I have learned not to open my mouth until I'm dead sure of what I'm talking about. Only recently I learned that Lightnin' Wilstead

would be available. I kept quiet until I knew."

"But how can we get in touch with him? By writing?"

Wade smiled. "Writing would be the last way. Writing sometimes turns up again—at the wrong time."

"But I could hardly go after him. Another death in the ranks of our enemies just after I'd been out of town would look bad," said Torry. "And it would look just as bad if you went after him."

"Well, that's indefinite, so far. If we could get Plug Keffer off at this trial, Plug would be expected to disappear anyhow. And he could execute this little mission for us. Of course it's going to be no sure thing with us in Keffer's case. Don't forget that Meadows is sheriff now, and Meadows will be hard to handle. Anyhow, come on over to 'The Bank.' I want to get into a talk with Judge Daniels. The old judge ought to be well oiled up with liquor by now. I might be able to suggest some lawyer in Phoenix or Tucson for prosecutor. You know me—I'll maneuver around to have it someone that I know."

"I'll leave it to you," said Torry, grinning.

A few minutes later, as they entered the bar of "The Bank" and ordered drinks, they saw the tall, white-whiskered figure of Judge Daniels at the other end of the bar.

The two tricksters dawdled over a couple of drinks while the Trinchera jurist downed several. "I'll try him now," suggested Wade, in an undertone. "The old judge seems to be in a mood to say yes to anything at the moment."

Indeed, the events of the next few moments seemed to prove this. Judge Daniels allowed himself to be bought still another drink, and this one was carried over to a table, where the wily lawyer began outlining his plan.

To his intense delight, a few moments before, Jim Lemmon had ambled into the bar with the information—disquieting to many but decidedly exhilarating to Bail-Bond Wade—that Nelson had been ordered by Doc Travers to remain in bed for at least three days. His fever had set in again.

If, thought Wade, he could only have the trial over by the time Nelson recovered, that would be a master stroke. Flint, one of the two eye-witnesses to the Gelder shooting, was dead. If One-Gun, the other witness, could not be present, that would be a piece of luck. Even a deposition from the wounded man would not have the same effect as his presence in court.

He continued to smile inwardly when Judge Daniels agreed quite readily to the trial of Keffer for the morrow.

"I suppose it could be started by two in the afternoon," said Wade, smoothly. "By that time we could have the man you appoint prosecutor here on the ground. He could get here from Tucson by that time."

"The trial," said Judge Daniels, "will start prompt at nine o'clock tomorrow mornin'."

"But how about the prosecutor?" asked Wade.

"We got a man right here to serve as prosecutor," said Daniels, directly.

Wade's heart bounded. Daniels might be referring to himself. "Whom do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," said Daniels, who spoke clearly despite the number of drinks he had had, "a man that I've been watchin' for some time. The fact that he's a public official needn't interfere with his temp'rary tenure of another office. The man I refer to is a fair man and a fearless man. I mean Carter Meadows."

Bail-Bond Wade's jaw dropped as he heard Daniels pronounce the name of his law partner. He had hoped to jockey the appointment of someone that he knew, and, possibly, someone he could handle. He could not handle Meadows. He knew that. And he also knew, as the partner of Carter Meadows, that the latter knew more law than nine out of ten of the biggest lawyers in the Southwest.

CHAPTER XIV

IT had been a long time since a capital case was tried in a Spring Green court. Before the advent of Mat Nelson and the renaissance of the machinery of law and order, capital cases in Spring Green were tried by the individuals concerned, and nobody else.

Rapidity on the draw sat as judge on the bench, and the twelve jurors were equally divided—six of them in the gun of one man, and six in the gun of the other. And that had been the meaning of trial by jury in Spring Green. In this way, the six-gun served as judge, jury and executioner.

The advent of a man who was quicker

on the draw than anybody ever seen in Spring Green, and whose reputation preceded him, was the only event that could change the prevailing interpretation of legal methods, providing that man chose to institute the change.

One-Gun was that man. And there was not a character in Spring Green who would not rather be tried in a court-room than by the six-shooter of Nelson. Plug Keffer himself had illustrated this point. Plug had not shrank from gun-fighting with anybody else in town. But he had been willing to march along to jail and be tried for murder by a legally constituted jury rather than chance the Nelson six-gun.

No house in Spring Green was considered large enough to accommodate the turnout expected to witness the trial of Plug Keffer. Probably the Bank Bar might have been sufficiently commodious, including the room at the rear; but Judge Daniels refused to cheapen the law in this way. Big Ed Grove had offered the Railroad Café dining-room. But Daniels, experienced with the emotions of crowds at murder trials in Arizona, thanked him, and declined the offer.

"They'd wreck your establishment, these hell-bendin' hombres," he said.

The result was that, overnight, the large room at the new, unfinished "City Hall," the very room originally intended for such occasions, was decked out for the big event. A temporary platform had been erected for Judge Daniels on the unvarnished floor, and every available chair in Spring Green was carried over to the City Hall and lined up in rows, as well as a number of benches, and a few kegs and hogsheads.

On the morning of the trial, when Judge Daniels approached the new courtroom, he found the scene already swarming with people.

It was a holiday in Spring Green. Nobody wished to miss the first big trial within a generation of mankind in the hardy little community. Word must have traveled for miles, for outside the red brick building, the judge recognized some of his townsfolk from Trinchera, placer-miners along Pueblo Creek, ranchers from distant parts, and a number of visitors who had not been in Spring Green for many a day.

On the stone stoop, before locked doors, stood the new sheriff, Carter Meadows. The latter, taking no risks of disorder before the arrival of the master of ceremonies, had refused to open the doors. It was a wise precautionary move.

The crowd made way for the judge, who walked with dignified mien directly to the doors of state. A hush fell over the multitude. At any other time they might have cheered; but this was no time for cheering—here impended the first real, legal hanging within the memory of most of these residents of Spring Green County.

JUDGE DANIELS paused for a moment to survey the crowd. An old electioneerer, Daniels saw an opportunity here for making an impression, and he could not resist it.

"Ladies," he began, bowing graciously to the nearest group of women. "And gents." The hush grew even deeper. The knowing not what to expect. Had the trial been postponed?

"We are gathered an' assembled here today," drawled Judge Daniels in fine orotund tones; "to witness an epoch-makin' proceedin' in the annals o' Western jestice." Daniels paused for effect, then continued:

"It's only in keepin' with the fittin' proprieties o' this here occasion for me to remind all you gents present that since it is law and order as we're here gathered an' assembled to enforce, that all you gents are goin' to behave like gents from beginnin' to end of the trial, complete an' entire.

"All o' you here assembled know that it cain't be possible ever to please everybody at one an' the same time. No matter what decision is goin' to be rendered by the fair an' honest jury about to be impaneled, that there decision is bound to aggravate the feelin's o' some folks as might think otherwise.

"Accordin'ly, it is my business as judge, to take all precautions necessary an' appertainin' to preserve order. In pursuit o' that duty to take such precautions, I'm goin' to have Mr. Carter Meadows, newly elected sheriff o' Spring Green County, appoint an' deputize a number o' fair-minded citizens here before me assembled, that I shall designate. These special deputies will stand here at this portal of our majestic temple o' jestice, an' collect the gun of every man amongst you as said man aims to come through this door. Not a man is a-goin' to enter these here halls without a-givin' up your shooter. I repeat, this order is made in the interests o' the peace o' this fair community, an' law an' peace

an' jestice is a-goin' to prevail. I thank you."

He designated a dozen men, who were to remain armed, and six were to be stationed inside the courtroom and six outside, to disarm any groups who might come late. Carter Meadows noticed that all twelve men selected were from Trinchera or points along Pueblo Creek, the judge evidently believing with good reason that Spring Greeners might prove partial to adherents of one side or the other and that the outlanders, less worked up over the Keffer case, would follow instructions impersonally.

It developed later, however, that a few of the six stationed outside could not refrain from sneaking into the courtroom for the big show. Men, women and children took what seats they could, Western gallantry, however, allowing the minority of women first choice in seats up front near the platform. Dorothy Grove managed to find accommodation in the front row, but was considerate enough for others, to hold her small brother on her lap.

The trial itself started smoothly. Bail-Bond Wade appeared as counsel for the defense. Meadows was applauded as he was announced to be the prosecuting attorney. Many necks craned about the room for a possible view of One-Gun. But it was soon seen that the popular ex-puncher was not among those present. Nor was Halliday there. Perhaps old Samuel was still, as he had threatened to do, keeping his nephew in his sickbed at the point of a six-gun.

Twenty-eight men were questioned at the temporary rail before the required twelve were sworn in as the jury. There was a little commotion when Meadows objected to the fact that most of the men were not citizens of Spring Green. His objection was set with Wade's statement that such citizens were highly prejudiced and held preconceived ideas. The judge concurred.

THE preliminaries and arguments on both sides occupied a couple of hours. The great number of hanging jaws and incredible expressions in the room bespoke the lack of comprehension in the minds of the audience.

"Witness for the prosecution," called Judge Daniels on one occasion, asking first for any witnesses Meadows might have.

"There were only two witnesses of the shooting, and they—

But Meadows was quickly interrupted by Wade.

"I object!" cried Bail-Bond Wade.

"Grounds?" asked the court.

"Counsel for the prosecution is deliberately attempting by indirect persuasion to prejudice the minds of the jury. I object to my opponent's off-hand enumeration of the number of witnesses, calculated to discredit any additional witnesses of the actual gun-fight whom I may be able to produce."

"Objection sustained," ruled the judge.

"I retract my statement, in view of the opinion of the court," said Meadows, bowing to the bench in his best Omaha manner. "The question will arise later, directly, at which time it will be argued. I have been able to find only two witnesses of the shooting," he corrected his former statement technically, "and one of them is now dead. He was unfortunately killed by a cowardly sniper before having time to appear before this court or to make any depositions pertaining to the case. I have, however, two witnesses to the words of the dead man, former Sheriff Jason Flint, pronounced immediately upon the scene of the shooting."

Rush Merrill, proprietor of "The Bank" saloon, was first called to the stand. He was asked by Meadows whether Flint had pointed out on the scene of the murder that Slim Gelder's gun had never been drawn, and that Gelder had been in the act of extending a piece of tobacco with his right hand to Keffer, still holding the tobacco in his hand as Keffer had drawn the fatal gun and killed Gelder. Merrill swore to the accuracy of this statement.

Earl Gortle was next called, and swore to the same truth. Gortle was a drunken man whose head had been on the table in "The Bank" bar at the time of the killing.

Satisfied on this score, Meadows graciously made way for Wade, who next addressed the court and jury.

"Your honor, and gentlemen of the jury. In your capacity as fair-minded peers of my unfortunate client, Mr. Keffer, sitting in unbiased judgment upon the actions of that unfortunate gentleman, it is your duty to discharge from your minds any preconceived notions regarding witnesses or the number of witnesses actually having seen the gun-fight, facts or half-facts which might have been indirectly delivered to you

either prior to or during the course of the present trial.

"It is my good fortune, happily for the interests of my unjustly maligned client, to be able to produce before you a number of witnesses who actually observed at first hand the entire action of the scene leading up to the death of Slim Gelder, a death brought upon Gelder by Mr. Keffer's act in self-defense."

WADE then brought his two witnesses to the stand, one at a time. They were two of the men who had been playing poker in the rear room of "The Bank" at the time of the shooting.

"As I understand," said Wade, addressing his first witness, "Mr. Rush Merrill, proprietor of the saloon known as 'The Bank,' came into the rear room of his establishment, in which room you were playing a game at cards. Mr. Merrill came through the swinging doors leading into that room, in order to wait upon your table and set down a few drinks. Is that correct?"

"Yes," answered the witness.

"Your table was so situated within that rear room that, if the doors had been open, you, who were facing the bar at the front of the main room, could have seen anything which might have occurred at that point. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"When Mr. Merrill passed through the swinging doors, he was carrying a tray in both hands, necessitating his pushing the doors open with his body. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"After clearing himself of the doors, Mr. Merrill proceeded to your table, and the doors were still swinging widely, back and forth. Correct?"

"Yes."

"And as these doors swung open and closed, and again open and closed, back and forth several times, Mr. Keffer and Mr. Gelder before the main bar were in plain view before your eyes. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"It was while these doors were thus swinging that Gelder extended a piece of tobacco toward the defendant, was it not?"

"Yes."

"With which hand did Gelder extend the tobacco?"

"With the left hand."

There was a gasp in the court room. The fact that Gelder's right hand had been free—at least according to this new testimony—had a deep significance for the audience. There was considerable restiveness in the courtroom, and Daniels realized that there might be trouble brewing here.

"Where?" thundered Wade, "was the right hand of the deceased—Gelder?"

"A-moseyin' down toward his holster."

"And is it a fact," asked Wade, "that Keffer, unknown to Gelder, was looking into the mirror above the bar and was enabled by means of this mirror to observe, unknown to Gelder, the latter's movements toward the holster?"

"Yes. I seen 'im lookin' into that mirror."

"And now kindly tell me in your own words, as briefly as possible, all of the ensuing action exactly as you saw it."

"Jes' as Gelder was a-nearin' of his holster, Keffer, without lookin' up toward Gelder, prob'ly a-fearin' t' give away thet he was on t' Gelder's game, quickly pulls his own right gun, all th' while a-lookin' into the mirror. Then he starts a sudden whirlin' roun' toward Gelder after a-beatin' him t' th' draw, an' fires almighty quick, so's Slim ain't even quick enough t' grab his own gun-butt. Slim's jes' got time to git his hand on his gun-butt when Plug fires. Gelder drops t' th' floor whilst his right hand swings down low, below his gun, fur Slim is dead afore he draws."

Wade then called the other card-playing witness and repeated the procedure. This witness had been seated at an angle, also facing the swinging doors.

Meadows had a trick up his sleeve, however. Mat Nelson, now unable to leave his bed, had sworn out a deposition stating all the facts in connection with the killing, pointing out specifically that Flint and he himself had been the only eye witnesses, the card-players in the rear room being behind closed doors and the only man in the main room being in a drunken stupor, face down on the table, asleep.

"With my final evidence I shall rest my case," said Meadows, preparing to bring out Mat's deposition and with it discrediting all the witnesses who might be conjured up by Wade. Meadows announced that Nelson had been prevented from attending court because of illness, fever and loss of blood, but had made out the deposition now in Meadows' hand, and that

this sworn statement would discredit any testimony of alleged witnesses brought to the stand by the counsel for the defense.

"I object to any statements being brought in, which were made by Matthew Nelson," spoke up Wade. A hush silenced the entire room.

"On what grounds do you base your objection?" asked Judge Daniels.

"On grounds that Mr. Nelson is a sick man, in a fever, and under the circumstances is not mentally qualified to appear either in person or by way of deposition in this trial at this time. His statements could not be those of a man in possession of his full senses, but would necessarily be the mental peregrinations of a man in a fever, possibly speaking out of delirium and imaginative fancies."

"Have you any proof that Mr. Nelson actually is in such a condition to disqualify his written testimony?" asked the court.

WADE produced statements sworn to by various persons, some from Trinchera, who claimed to have seen and heard Nelson after he had sunk into delirium. Then Wade went on to enumerate cases of precedent wherein depositions made by men in such conditions had been rejected by courts.

"What has counsel for the prosecution to say?" asked the judge.

"Your honor," spoke up Meadows, "these claims refer to the patient on the night following the patient's accident. Since then, Mr. Nelson has recovered sufficiently to ride in a spring wagon back to this town and to deliver a public address to the citizens at the time of the election. Moreover, Dr. Travers was present and witness to the making of the deposition and had examined the patient at that very hour. The patient, Matthew Nelson, was then in full possession of his senses, as Dr. Travers, now in this room before your honor, will testify."

Dr. Travers was called to the witness stand and swore to the truth of Meadows' statement.

"Objection of counsel for the defense is overruled," announced Judge Daniels, and Meadows prepared again to proceed.

"I object," cried Wade, again, and Judge Daniels's face clouded. He did not like to be questioned on a point of law.

"Have you any other ground?" he asked, somewhat gruffly.

"I have, sir. Mr. Nelson is incapable, even in full possession of his senses, to deliver any fair account of what happened. It is well known to almost all persons in this court room that Nelson and my client, Mr. Keffer, had a violent altercation on the very first day of Nelson's arrival in town. Since then there has been nothing but very bad blood between them, and under the circumstances his deposition must be colored and inadmissible."

"Have you witnesses to the altercation?"

It was easy to produce the witnesses, who swore to the fight between Mat and Keffer; but several refused to swear that bad blood persevered in the case of Mat, who seemed to have acted quite charitably at the time and even afterward. Many other men, they declared, might have engaged Keffer in a gun-fight and killed him with impunity, but Nelson did not do so.

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Daniels of Wade.

"No, sir, your honor! I can readily discredit the statement to the effect that no bad blood persevered on the part of Nelson. Mr. Nelson, directly after the unfortunate incident leading to this trial, threatened the life of the defendant, Mr. Keffer, offering to shoot it out with him then and there, hoping to enrage Mr. Keffer and embroil him into another shooting engagement. I can produce witnesses to the effect that Nelson threatened the life of Mr. Keffer and sought to force him into another fight, but that Mr. Keffer—fortunately for Nelson," added Wade, a sarcastic smile on his face, "refused to have any more gun-fighting, preferring to maintain law and order and to stand on his merits before any fair-minded court and jury."

Witnesses were produced, a number of them, who had heard Mat's heated challenge to Keffer.

"Objection of counsel for defense sustained; deposition of Mr. Matthew Nelson is inadmissible," ruled Judge Daniels.

There was an uproar in the courtroom. Several men rushed from their seats toward Wade and some toward Daniels. Here was a situation trying to the strongest-hearted judge who ever lived. But Daniels was equal to it.

"Silence! Order in the courtroom!" he thundered in a voice which few would have believed so powerful in a man of his age. Then turning to the six special dep-

uties inside the room, he thundered again:

"Shoot to kill any man who makes a hostile gesture toward any person whatsoever on this here platform!"

The rushing stopped. The judge's word was law, and here were a dozen six-guns to enforce that law with volleys of death, while the angered spectators were for the most part unarmed.

"Law an' order is a-goin' to prevail an' I'm goin' to see that it is!" roared Daniels, again. "Everybody return to his seat!"

"Bail-Bond Wade's a lyin' trickster!" shouted someone.

"Throw that man out o' the courtroom!" ordered the judge.

The command was enforced, and order once more restored, under the firm hand of the fearless judge.

"Now, if there's any more objectors to these here proceedin's, let them objectors leave the room 'fore they cause more disturbance an' have to be thrown out," announced the judge.

"Now," continued Judge Daniels, "I repeat, the deposition o' Mr. Nelson is inadmissible owin' to possible variations from fact an' impartial truth."

But again came a disturbance.

"If Mat Nelson says something, it's true!"

THE voice piped like a shrill whistle. There was a commotion as folks rose to see the origin of the opinion. Then a loud guffaw broke loose all over the room. Men and women rolled convulsed in laughter. The owner of the thin, piping little voice, it developed, was little five-and-a-half-year old Richard Matthew Grove. Dorothy, his sister, in whose lap the youngster was seated in the front row, flushed a violent crimson as she made a hysterical motion to quiet the courageous and outspoken child.

The heartiest laugh came from Judge Daniels himself.

"When a young 'un like you," said Daniels, after some measure of quiet had returned, "stands up an' champions a man, I'm like to believe that that there man is an honest an' upright individual. But I'm sorry for your sake, young man, that this is a court o' law, an' as such we must disallow your testimony complete an' entire. It sure makes me grieve to disappoint you, but it has t' be done."

As the scene, after much laughter, once more took on the aspects of a court of law, the trial proceeded orderly.

"Mr. Meadows," said Judge Daniels, "if you have any more to say, say it now. Have you any more witnesses?"

"I have." Meadows turned to the front row of spectators. "Mr. Clem Torry," he said, addressing that individual. "I call you to the witness stand!"

Here was a shock. Wade tightened his jaws firmly, wondering what was under cover here. Torry, taken completely by surprise, showed astonishment in his every feature. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, Torry stumped up to the witness stand and was sworn in.

"Torry," began Meadows, "on the day on which Nelson and the defendant, Keffer, engaged in their fight, just after Slim Gelder was seen emerging from a discussion with you, my worthy opponent, and the defendant, Mr. Keffer, did you or did you not say in your office, about Gelder: 'He could be a dead little rat. I hope, Plug, that you don't get in any gun-fight with Gelder. It 'ud break my soft old heart to see him layin' cold an' implacable in death!' Did you say that?"

It was improbable that any man could be taken more completely by surprise than Clem Torry was taken at this moment. Tenseness gripped every fiber of human flesh in the entire room. Even Judge Daniels sat bolt upright in his chair.

This was the last ace-in-the-hole of Meadows. He had heard the rumpus in the private rear-room of the Wade and Meadows suite on the occasion of Gelder's last visit there, and, wondering what it was all about, had gone to see if anything was wrong. Gelder's voice and Torry's, too, had carried to him.

But here, in this courtroom, if Torry could not be stampeded into making admission to this statement, all would be lost. For Meadows, as the prosecuting attorney, could not introduce himself as a witness and tell what he had overheard. Meadows had an interest in the case, and his testimony could not be taken. It all depended on whether Torry, shocked almost out of his senses, would let the cat out of the bag. If Torry would admit the charge, then no witness would be necessary.

In Torry's mind ran a gamut of obsessions of fear and incertitude. If Meadows made this statement, he certainly must

have it backed up with conclusive evidence, or he would never bring out the fact that the group in the conference room had been spied upon. How many spies had overheard it? Had Gelder sneaked back and heard it, and then sworn to it before witnesses now within reach? Meadows must be sure of his ground. That being true, if Torry denied it, then Meadows might prove him a liar, guilty of perjury. It might be the one definite crime to be proved against Torry, and it might get him prison.

CLEM TORRY, the man who would import snipers, call upon gunmen, bribe witnesses into perjury and stoop to almost any measure, feared to put his own hide in a position of danger. At this moment, his own safety was uppermost in his mind. Bail-Bond Wade was a genius. Wade would get him out of this and win the case even if he did make the admission. Moreover, Torry feared that already the conflicting expressions on his own face and the few seconds following the question which had caught him so completely off guard might already have convinced the court of the truth. Anyhow, the charge did not mean that he had killed or ordered the death of Gelder.

"I did!" admitted Clem Torry.

Bail-Bond Wade sat immobile of feature.

"Then," said Meadows, now leaning forward and pointing his finger at Torry's face, "did the defendant, Keffer, answer you: 'Waal, I may break yore heart then, sometime'? Did Keffer say that?"

"Yes." This time Torry answered with an affected yawn of disinterest. At worst, it was Keffer's neck now endangered.

"That is all," said Meadows. "I am through with the witness."

"Gentlemen of the jury," he addressed the jury box, "you have just heard an admission from the last witness that Gelder 'could be a dead little rat.' You have heard that Torry sarcastically put himself on record as not desirous for the death of Gelder, meaning, of course, that nothing would please him better than the demise of Slim Gelder. And you have heard the admission that Keffer, the defendant, threatened the life of Gelder beyond the hearing of Gelder, intimating that he intended some day to kill Gelder. On this evidence, I rest my case, your honor."

With a brief summary to the jury, Meadows retired to his seat.

There was cheering in the audience, and once more Judge Daniels was called upon to restore order. Again the judge called Wade.

"There is nothing in Torry's testimony," declared Wade, "to indicate any intentional harm toward Gelder, as my opponent tries to impress you. Torry said definitely that he absolutely would not like to see Gelder 'cold and implacable in death.' And the defendant, Keffer, in answering Torry at that time as he did, merely intimated that in case he ever would happen to get into a gun-fight with Gelder, he would come out victorious.

"Already, you have witnesses that Gelder baited Keffer. The latter did not try to bait Gelder. You have heard testimony that Gelder was the first to sneak a hand to a holster, that Keffer was not the first to do so. And now, gentlemen, I have the supreme pleasure of summoning before you a man who sat in a chair in the very room of the gun-fight and saw it all from beginning to end. Earl Gortle, I summon you to the witness stand."

Then followed the most outrageous perversion of justice and the most scalding bit of perjury in all the experience of Carter Meadows as a lawyer and a man. He heard Gortle swear that he was not drunk at all, that he had been watching the entire Keffer-Gelder quarrel and had heard Gelder's baiting, and then, sensing a gun-fight and wishing not to be involved, had rested his head on the table in pretense of drunkenness. But all the time, he swore, he had been watching through the corner of an eye, and that everything was exactly as Wade's other witnesses had sworn

Judge Daniels instructed the jury to consider this last testimony as a question of fact to be decided by them in session, and not without also considering the testimony during the other moments of the trial.

Even then, Meadows did not give up, but hoped that no fair-minded jury from Spring Green County could possibly acquit Keffer. Meadows had done his best in an honest way, with one of two witnesses dead, and the only surviving witness's deposition rejected. Still he was hopeful.

After half an hour, the jury filed out of the private room. The foreman stood up and announced the decision.

"After fair an' impartial consideration of all th' tes'mony on all th' sides o' th'

hull case," he said, "we arrived at th' decision in yonder room, which though we'd admire to arrive at th' opposite decision, but law an' order must be perserved as the jedge say, an' we had to be honest an' consider th' preponderatin' mass o' eveedence. I repeat, we arrived at th' decision thet th' defended, Plug Keffer, is innocent on this here occasion, an' thet he killed Slim Gelder in self-defense, much as we wish he didn't."

Once more there were signs of rioting, and cheers of the Torry gang mingled with angry shouts of outraged decent citizens, and one man yelled that if Judge Daniels acquitted Plug Keffer, "mebbe Jedge Lynch wouldn't be so all-fired easy on 'im."

But once more the dominating voice of Judge Daniels cut through the din, and Meadows, too, although he had lost, helped to preserve order. The room was cleared, sullen men filing out past the guards. Plug Keffer was discharged, and Judge Daniels repaired to the bar of "The Bank" saloon, not quite as arid a place as the bar of justice.

CHAPTER XV

IT was a little over three weeks after the acquittal of Plug Keffer for murder. There had been considerable bad feeling engendered in Spring Green; even a number of neutral persons who were of the followings neither of Nelson nor the Torry gang were of the opinion that Keffer had been guilty and had been freed by trickery and perjury. Immediately after his discharge, Keffer had disappeared from Spring Green; in fact, had disappeared from the general community. It was known that he was not at Trinchera, and Mat Nelson, who had ridden over to San Miguel, had found no trace of the discharged killer there.

It was not to locate Keffer, however, that Mat had ridden over to San Miguel; Keffer had been freed by law, and Mat, in favor of law and order, would not see that Keffer received capital punishment at his own hands. His trip to San Miguel had been made for an entirely different purpose.

During his confinement to his bed and later to his home on account of the injuries sustained through the sniper's bullets, Mat had heard that the dead sniper had been recognized as a questionable character, originally from Larupo County. Just before the Flint killing, Mat was aware, Torry had disappeared from Spring Green, ostensibly to do some trading and attend to some business interests at San Miguel. He wondered if Torry instead might not have gone clear on to Larupo County. If he found that Torry had not been at San Miguel, then Mat had planned to go further south and see if he could trace any connection between the sniper and Torry.

He had ridden over to San Miguel and had discovered that Torry had been there, two days before the Flint killing, and just as he was about to drop, unwillingly, his suspicion of Torry in the Flint killing, had learned by chance that Torry, while in San Miguel, had been seen conferring with a man who answered exactly to the description of the dead sniper.

It was one more proof of the lengths to which Torry would go; and it was final proof to Mat that Torry would stop at nothing to attain his ends. Torry had bought still another parcel of land in the environs of Spring Green; bought it at a negligible price. And the land, Mat knew, was oil land.

As he loped along from San Miguel back toward Spring Green, Mat thought over matters. He had not been idle during his recovery from the wounds sustained during the night fight with the sniper. He had been visited during his convalescence by Dorothy Grove—a delightful period and by the six Lemmon girls—an undelightful period—and by Carter Meadows, whom Mat had admired more and more as he got to know him better. Meadows and Mat had talked over the oil possibilities in Spring Green, and each believed that defeating the Torry gang in this matter would be a matter of financing. Mat had doubted that his uncle, although a rich man, would invest much of his fortune in oil, a development on which he was less than lukewarm, and Meadows had volunteered to get into immediate touch with a wealthy friend back in Omaha. This man, Barry Rand, had seen the possibilities at once, and had come on to Spring Green. He had brought along his daughter, Coralie, a girl of twenty, the possessor of much culture and beauty.

One-Gun Nelson, not a ladies' man, nevertheless had been thinking a great deal about Coralie Rand. She was of a type

he had never seen before; she was undoubtedly the prettiest girl that he had ever seen. Nelson thrilled when he looked at her; and yet, somehow, she did not have the wholesome effect upon him that, for instance, Dorothy Grove had. Dorothy Grove, despite her good education, was unselfish enough to stoop to comparatively menial labor to help out her father in his business. Dorothy Grove was the kind of a girl who would make a man a good wife.

HIS romantic thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a lone rider about a mile away. The rider, galloping along a trail from the south, was approaching the Spring Green road diagonally, and possibly, Mat thought, would cross the road and continue northward. But, as Mat, mounted on Silver Dollar, was approaching the fork where the two trails joined, he noticed that the rider, mounted on a strong chestnut horse with one white stocking, had turned along the Spring Green trail. Mat gave Silver his head and soon was abreast of the lone rider.

"Howdy, stranger," he greeted. "I reckon yo're aimin' to ride 'long to Spring Green."

The rider looked up suspiciously. "I might be," he said.

Mat looked over this unsociable rider. The man had a long scar from the lobe of his ear down along his neck, and the sharpness of his gaze was intensified by the unusual feature of blond, almost white eyelashes veiling a pair of keen, ink-black eyes. His skin had been burned to a brick-red, and the faded ends of his mustache also showed the effects of a strong sun.

"I'm lopin' toward Spring Green myself," said One-Gun. "I notice yo're travelin' a little light, but I b'en down to San Miguel, an' I got plenty o' water, an' a few tins o' greengages in my bags which are right good eatin' on a thirsty sort o' day, so if yo're thirsty, stranger, jes' sing out."

The stranger nodded his head, rather sullenly. No talker, this man, whoever he was. He rode along beside the stranger, now and then essaying a remark, but seldom eliciting anything but monosyllables in return.

As the pair of horsemen approached Spring Green, the trail narrowed. Now and then One-Gun would pull out so that his silent companion might have the benefit of the trail, while he himself rode through the rather high chaparral at this point. Now and then the stranger pulled out. It was during an instance of this sort that an episode happened which made Mat look sharply at the scarred, red face of the lean rider.

THE latter, still loping along, had reached for his tobacco sack, and was rolling a wheatstraw cigarette—with his left hand, Mat noticed. His right hand held the bridle low. That hand, Mat noticed, could in an instant have dropped to the holster at his right side. Here was a cautious man, taking no chances with strangers. As the trail came to a bend, the lean rider veered his white-stockinged mount from the trail for an instant, to avoid a large cactus sprouting at the side of the trail. There was a whirring sound almost directly beneath the rider's horse. It was a sound that Mat knew well—the warning of a rattlesnake. Both horses bounded ahead nervously, but in much less time than it takes to tell it, the stranger's right hand had dropped to his holster, there was a quick shot, and Mat, looking back a foot or two, saw a headless rattler squirming in the trail beside the cactus. The stranger's gun had been sheathed in his holster again, and the white eyelashed man was proceeding calmly to roll his cigarette and lick the paper.

One-Gun looked at the stranger in silent admiration. The stranger was lighting his cigarette; he had apparently forgotten about the incident. One-Gun looked at the stranger's scarred face, the black eyes, the light eyelashes, the brick-red face. Many a time, down near the border, he had heard of Lightnin' Wilstead. And this man beside him, he would almost have sworn to it now, was none other than Lightnin' Wilstead!

"Yo're mighty handy with a smoke-wagon, stranger," offered Mat.

The stranger nodded his head, and went on inhaling his cigarette.

"I don't reckon I coulda done better'n that myself," added Mat.

A smile suspiciously like a sneer curled the faded mustache of the rider. This man was hard to talk to—One-Gun fell silent again.

This man was probably Lightnin' Wilstead all right. And on the way to Spring Green! Why?

Mat almost sensed why. Torry and

Wade were about ready for their final coup, there was little doubt of that. Might they not strike at him in some original way to have him disappear quickly from the scene in order that they could go ahead unhampered? And might not their way be to send to Spring Green a gunman who could have it out with him and destroy him? This man beside him, he admitted, was as quick with a gun as he was himself; possibly quicker now since his injuries. And for reasons, good reasons known to himself, Mat did not crave a gun-fight with this man.

As he rode along he realized that probably this was where Keffer had disappeared to—to go south and hire this Lightnin' Wilstead. He wondered if the rider would react to Keffer's name.

"We b'en havin' some consid'able excitement in Spring Green," he ventured. "An hombre named Plug Keffer's b'en up fur murder. Ever heerd o' th' trial down yore way?"

"No," said the stranger, bluntly.

"Never heerd o' Plug Keffer? He's right well known in these parts."

"I never heerd tell of 'im."

"Jus' might be possible you'd run into him, I thought," said Mat. "A gent don't allus stick to his cradle name in these parts. Keffer mighta took some other handle sence his run-in over in Spring Green. Heavy-set feller—coupla hundred pounds on th' hoof—black eyes—front teeth missin'."

"I don't know no'un aroun' here," said the stranger, surlily.

Mat relapsed into silence again. He doubted if this Wilstead knew he was riding beside the very man that—Mat surmised—he might have been imported to challenge and kill in an open gun-fight. All the better, thought Mat. He pulled his wide hat down further on his head, so as further to hide the scar on his temple, the result of the sniper's bullet. Possibly Keffer might have described him to Wilstead; but the description would mean but little unless the stranger saw the crease mark. Young, tall men in punchers' outfits were common in this section; and Mat's single, low-swung gun would not identify him. Many a man in this community carried a single gun. Nelson's nickname had come to him simply because he could do more execution with his solitary weapon than most men could with two.

When the cross-board sign of the railroad tracks came in sight, One-Gun was heartily glad of it. It would not be long now, before he would be back in Spring Green.

Long before the pair of horsemen reached the sign-board, however, he could see that there was a steady stream of horsemen, buckboards, Canastoga wagons and pack-burros passing up along the Trinchera trail and turning into the road toward Spring Green. The matter puzzled him. There was seldom traffic between Trinchera and Spring Green. As he neared the railroad crossing, he hailed a man who was walking beside a burro.

"What's goin' on, stranger?" asked Mat. "Things look active-like seems t' me."

"Yo're darned right!" was the answer. "Whar you b'en? Ain't you heard o' the strike?"

"A gold strike?" One-Gun was dumfounded. Then this strange rider, that he had believed to be Lightnin' Wilstead, might have heard something of the strike and be riding up to take part in it. The man might be coming to Spring Green on legitimate business.

Nelson and the scar-faced man turned their horses toward the trail that ran across the creek, into Spring Green. At the creek, they picked up another horseman.

"Howdy, thar, One-Gun!" yelled the new horseman. "See you come back fur the strike all right."

AT the mention of Nelson's name, his silent companion looked up sharply. Then, however, he cast down his eyes discreetly.

Mat greeted the horseman, who joined himself and his companion.

"Whar was the strike made?" asked Mat.

"Down Mesa del Oro way. Looks like th' real thing."

The answer made Mat more thoughtful and dubious than ever. Mesa del Oro was nearly a hundred miles south of Spring Green, on the very fringe of Larupo County. If this man was Wilstead, who hailed from Larupo County, he should have known about the strike. That made things different. This man had been riding away from a gold strike instead of toward one. Larupo County was much nearer Mesa del Oro than Spring Green was.

He decided to find out whether or not this man was really Lightnin' Wilstead. "This is a friend o' mine, Tom Gammon,"

he said to the scar-faced man. "And this," he added, turning to Gammon, "is—"

He waited for his companion to make known his name.

"Glad to meet ye," said the scar-faced rider, bluntly, without mentioning his name. The three rode toward Spring Green in silence. At the fork turn, the scar-faced man took the trail that led past the burned Grove dwelling. Nelson and Gammon continued along the trail that led by the Halliday home.

"Who found th' gold down thar?" Mat asked Gammon.

"Funny thing," Gammon answered. "Plug Keffer made the strike. He was pullin' out o' these parts for good, an' made the strike accidental-like when he was makin' camp at Gila Creek."

"Then Keffer's back in town?"

"I dunno whuther he's here now or not. Anyhow, he was back. I heerd a lotta guff in town as how Keffer was so all-fired thankful to Wade fur a-gittin' him acquitted thet he put Wade right into this gold-strike thing after claims was filed. It's changed th' opinions in town somewhat on Keffer. But Wade's a-sayin' thet th' man was allus a good, honest feller at heart, an' thet this here act o' his proves it. An' Clem Torry's in purty heavy on th' thing, too, through Wade, I reckon."

As they continued their ride down toward the main street of Spring Green, the two horsemen overtook several other wagons, piled high and moving slowly—Trinchera placer-miners and squatters and loungers on the way to Mesa del Oro, taking the direct route which would pass through Spring Green and continue south.

Turning in at the gate of the Halliday home, One-Gun soon found that his uncle was not at home. Was it possible that even his conservative old uncle, lured by this magnet of gold down at Mesa del Oro, had also started to trek along the trail? Had possibilities of raw, red gold proved stronger for Samuel Halliday than all his much talked-of plans for the Saucepan Mine?

While Mat stood there, Cleopatra Lemmon appeared on the Lemmon veranda.

"Howdy, Mr. Nelson," she greeted. "I reckon you're looking for your uncle. He rode down into town a few minutes ago with father. I suppose they're down talkin' over the gold-strike. Oh, I'm so excited." Cleopatra slapped her hands girlishly.

But Mat was not playing the rôle of Marc Anthony today. He refused to be lured. "Thanks," he said, removing his wide hat and replacing it on his head again. "I reckon I'll jine 'em."

He found Jim Lemmon and his uncle, as Cleopatra had opined, in an excited conference having to do with the gold-strike. They were sitting in Ed Grove's restaurant at a table with the proprietor and his daughter. He learned through them that only a few hours after his own departure for San Miguel, Plug Keffer had returned to Spring Green with the sensational news of his strike. He also learned that the news had set the entire countryside afire with excitement and expectation, and that many land-owners, previously approached with offers by Torry were now as eager to sell as, formerly, they had been unwilling. Nelson's heart was heavy. In spite of all his efforts, it seemed that Fate was playing directly into the hands of Clem Torry. Already a line of anxious would-be sellers stretched from the Wade and Meadows stairway almost down to the door of the Pacific Pool-Hall.

"It shore looks to me like this is the end o' Spring Green," said Big Ed Grove, somewhat dolefully.

Samuel Halliday thumped his veined hand on the table. "End o' Spring Green?" he echoed, challengingly. "There won't be no end o' Spring Green till Sam'l Halliday a-passes in his checks. I seen gold-strikes afore in my time."

Jim Lemmon clapped his old friend on the shoulder. "An' thet goes fur me, too, Sam'l," he said harshly. "I'm still a-wagerin' on Spring Green."

"Torry an' Wade mus' believe in it a lot," was Grove's opinion. "I b'en hearin' thet they've grub-staked a lot of fellers to git down to Mesa del Oro — doin' it on shares."

Mat looked out at the line before the law-office. "They're cleanin' up on both ends," he said. "Sharin' on th' gold down thar, and makin' a killin' up here by—" He cut short his opinion.

AFTER rather a gloomy session, the four walked out to the gallery of the restaurant, attracted by activity in the line of people across the street. The law-clerk from Tucson whom Wade had installed in his office since the break-up with Meadows was going along the line. Mat

could clearly hear his announcement: "Mr. Wade and Mr. Torry asked me to make the announcement that they're too busy to see anybody but the people to whom they've already made offers."

"Them hyenas is jest after the ile lands," said Jim Lemmon. "Thet filthy ile! Bah!" He spat in disgust. "I b'en livin' a long time hereabouts, an' I never knowed no 'un to make any money out'n ile!"

"Ner me, neither," put in Halliday. And Mat Nelson looked on sorrowfully. It would take some time to convince these two old panners that there might be bigger fortunes in liquid gold than in the yellow metal itself.

As he stood there, a well-dressed, stocky and somewhat smug-looking man accompanied by a fashionably-dressed girl passed by the restaurant. It was Barry Rand, from Omaha, and his daughter, the friends of Meadows. They were evidently on the way to Meadows' office. Mat left the porch and overtook the newcomers.

Dorothy Grove looked after his tall form with some interest. "That girl's about the prettiest one that ever came to Spring Green, I reckon," she observed.

"Oh, I don't reckon she has any special charm fuh Mat," said Samuel Halliday. "He jes' happened to meet her, through Meadows. Mat ain't much of a ladies' man; an' anyhow, I remember a talk I had with Mat. It was jes' when he come t' town, an' I asked him ef he'd ever met a gal he liked better'n hisself. He mentioned some gal as he was purty well gone on—some gal he met in his travels down 'long the border, I reckon. So I'm sorter of th' opinion thet Mat's heart's already b'en lassoed."

He laughed. But Dorothy Grove did not laugh. If she had any emotions at all, no one would have known it from looking at her right now. "Oh," she said. That was all.

Mat's interest in the newcomers, as it happened, was not at the moment romantic. Since Rand was apparently bound for Meadows' office, this would be as good a time as any to get down to cases on the planned financing. Every minute that was being lost would be just that much advantage for Torry and Wade to make their strike in liquid gold. He found Meadows just as anxious as himself to get down to business with Rand. It soon became apparent to him that the conferences of Meadows and Rand while he himself had been over at San Miguel had been unproductive. Rand, a conservative business man who wasted few words and who knew exactly how to say "No," had already decided not to invest in or finance any propositions, oil or otherwise. "I believe in oil, in the future of it, that is," he amended, in his crisp manner. "Some fortunes are going to be made in it out here. And some fortunes will be lost in it, too—mark my words. I've seen both things happen, in Pennsylvania. You see, I've been in the banking business. I've never been an oil man, and now, with my fortune made, I don't want to take even the slightest risk at my time of life. I'm still willing to cooperate with you gentlemen—insofar as I can remain in a game that I know—in banking, money-lending. If you people have such faith in this proposition, and can show me that you have any real collateral security, all right. I haven't even seen much of this land you have spoken about, Meadows. And, by the way, I've hired a couple of horses for Coralie and myself. I think we might ride out into the country today, and incidentally I might look over some of the land you mention."

The cold, business-like man bowed smugly and, with his daughter at his side, left the office.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR a few seconds after the departure of Coralie Rand and her father, Meadows and Nelson sat opposite each other with gloomy expressions. What they needed was investment capital, not loans.

"Waal," said Mat, "thar ain't much time we kin lose now. Torry's got a line outside his office. Folks is still stormin' his doors. An' from what I overheard as I stood on th' gallery o' the Railroad Café, thet slick rattler is a-turnin' away the folks that had land as is no use to 'im, turnin' 'em away on the pretext o' bein' busy, an' givin' his time strictly to them folks as had th' lands he wants. What we need, Meadows, is some real action now. Nothin' else'll do us any good."

One-Gun did not for a moment underestimate the task before him. He realized to the full the lure of a gold-strike.

"Thar's only one thing I kin do, now," he said to Meadows. "I gotta see thet uncle o' mine. Thet uncle o' mine is stub-

born, an' sorter set in his ways, but he's got a heart on him, Meadows, like an ox. I gotta try an' make him see my p'int, an' git him to furnish some security fur this Rand feller. I'm a-goin' t' see him right now—pronto!"

He left the gloomy Meadows sitting there and wandered back toward the Railroad Café. He noticed that the line in front of Wade's office was as long as ever, despite the announcement of Wade's clerk. He crossed over and came to a stop near the middle of the line. Many men in it were waving to him, and greeting him by name.

Nelson returned the greetings, and then: "Ef Torry an' Wade is so all fired anxious to do some o' you boys a good turn," he said, "why don't they grub-stake some o' you fellers instead o' takin' yore homes away from you? He could lend you th' money with yore lands as security, sorter mortgage 'em, like."

The line curled up around Mat.

"Thar's somethin' in them sentiments o' your'n," admitted one of the men.

"I reckon thet's right," said a couple of others.

"But," added Nelson, warming to the situation, "you notice thet them boys in thet office is insistin' on takin' title t' yore lands, takin' yore homes clean away from you, thet's what! Now, I'm a-figgerin' thet it ain't fur nothin' thet they want yore homes an' yore lands. They're a-thinkin' thar's ile in them lands, an' they want to git it, an' they want to git rid o' you good people so's you won't never come back here. Y'all know thet most o' you's goin' to be disapp'inted in this strike; thar ain t more'n one in fifty o' you thet's goin' to find gold, in any amount. An' then, what's th' rest o' you goin' to do? You'll be without money, homeless, without a place t' come to; an' lots o' you'll be too shamed t' come back t' yore ol' home town an' show thet after all these years yore money's gone, yore homes, too, an' y'ain't got a place t' lay yore heads! An' Clem Torry an' Wade holdin' title to th' places you called home fur thirty year!"

It was the older heads among the listeners who took the counsel most seriously.

"Ile!" echoed one young man, a trifle sneeringly. "I ain't never seen none of it."

"It never lit no lamps fur me!" called another. "Whar I'm a-goin' thar's gold."

The result of Mat's talk was that fourteen of the older men dropped out of the line, congregated a few yards away, then decided among themselves to heed the words of the deputy-sheriff and wend their various ways back home.

"What's thet you done over yonder t' them folks?" asked Halliday of his nephew as the latter crossed to the Grove establishment. Grove, Lemmon, Halliday and a few others were still standing on the gallery before the restaurant, and had noticed Nelson's talk to the people in line. Dorothy Grove, as One-Gun returned, silently stole away from the group and back into the restaurant.

"I done what I reckon is my duty, Uncle Sam," explained Mat, "an' I'm aimin' now t' take you home with me an try to prove to you thet thar's somethin' in th' line o' duty thet you kin do, now. It's powerful important, an' we cain't lose no time at this p'int!"

"I'll jine you," said Jim Lemmon. "Gotta git home myself."

THEY were about to leave the gallery, but Halliday suddenly noticed that his nephew did not move. Nelson was training his eyes a few doors down, where Lightnin' Wilstead—Mat now felt sure of the man's identity—was ambling down the street, having tied his horse to the hitch-rail in front of "The Bank" saloon. At that moment Plug Keffer, whom Nelson had not seen since his arrest by old Jason Flint, came out of the drinking emporium. Nelson's eyes were riveted on the meeting between Keffer and Wilstead. There was no meeting. The two men passed each other by as though each might have been blind. There was not even a nod. Halliday, Lemmon, Grove and the others, following the eyes of One-Gun, took in the scene. They wondered what it meant. Nobody asked. Mat turned on his heel, walked over and leaped on the back of Silver Dollar, and rode along toward home, Halliday and Lemmon at his side. Jim Lemmon went into his own house.

Four hours, One-Gun and Samuel Halliday sat and discussed and argued. "Thar's more money in ile then in gold," insisted Mat, for the tenth time. "Gold's an ol'-timer, but ile is new. Millions has been made in ile, back east. Th' same thing's goin' to happen here. Thet's why Torry and Wade is workin' thar heads off an' stoppin' at nothin'—gun-play, snipin' an mur-

der included. I know what I'm a-talkin' 'bout, Uncle Sam!"

"Have you got proof on the murder, I mean?" asked Halliday.

"Not legal proof, but enough fer me," answered Mat. "I found out thet Torry was in San Miguel all right, thet time. But who does he meet thar? He meets an' talks with thet thar sniper thet come here an' murdered ol' Jase afore Torry hisself gits back to town. Thet's what I found out. An' now thar's more dirty work."

Halliday was surprised at the information. "What's thet?" he asked.

"Thet stranger I was lookin' at down by th' saloon, jest afore we left Grove's—he's Lightnin' Wilstead!"

Halliday sat bolt upright.

"I'm a-thinkin'," continued Mat, "thet Plug Keffer went down to th' border an' dragged thet hombre up here t' practice shootin' with me. An' it's Clem Torry as sent Keffer down thar t'git him; nobody else. Lightnin' ain't no sniper; he fights fair an' squar', whatever his principles, an' he prob'ly figures he's takin' a mite of a chance in shootin' with me, an' he's goin' to ask big money fur takin' them chances! Lightnin' an' Keffer passed each other down thar like they ain't never seed each other afore. Thet wa'n't good actin', 'cause the right way 'ud be fur Keffer t' greet a stranger in town. They're a pair o' pore actors, them fellers—an' a pair o' bad actors, too!"

"An' Torry got this man, Lightnin' Wilstead, to fight you?"

"Thar ain't no other reason. An' don't forgit, in order to git up here, Wilstead had to pass right by thet thar big gold strike down in Mesa del Oro, right by Larupo County. It takes a mite o' bribin' an' a fightin' good reason to make a man like Lightnin' ride plumb past th' biggest gold-strike in twenty year. He ain't here fur nothin' at all!"

"An' th' reason Torry gits 'im up is to git you out'n the way, so's he kin tie up all these here ile lands, is it?" ruminated Halliday.

"Now you got me straight, Uncle Sam!" One-Gun pounded the table with his fist. "Torry knows how much money thar is in ile. I'm aimin' to beat thet thar crook, Torry, an' his crony, Wade, with all their Keffers an' Lightnin' Wilsteads an' everything else, an' beat them at their own game. Thar ain't no other way. An' thet's why it's up to you, Uncle Sam'l, to help me now. It's all followin' my promise to stick it out here with you an' do my best to clean up the town you love an' save all yore ol' friends from a good shearin' at the hands of a bunch o' thieves, snipers an gunmen. Ef you don't help me now, then all I done is good fur nothin'. An' yore hull dream is a-goin' up in smoke. What's yore Saucepan worth to you or anybody if Torry's boss o' Spring Green? An' I'm tellin' you thet Torry is a-goin' to be the boss ef you ain't openin' up right now and reco'nize that new times is at hand, thet we gotta fight back with ile at this p'int o' th' game, not with ol' ideas an' ol' prejerdices. Thar comes a time when every man is got to change his mind 'bout new things, an' this is yore time, Uncle Sam'l. Thet's all I got to say."

It was enough. The pact between Halliday and his nephew was sealed right then. Halliday, gambling on his nephew rather than on oil, because he knew men better than he did oil, agreed to go the limit in his characteristic way. Nor did he stop at this. Claiming that he and Jim Lemmon had made their stakes together, he dropped in on Jim and pledged Jim to put a certain amount of his available cash at the disposition of his nephew.

"Call on Jim ef you need more money than I'm turnin' over to you," said Halliday, that evening. "I'm a-thinkin' to leave Spring Green fur a few days—a leetle vacation as y'might say."

As Mat, two days after his uncle's departure, closed a satisfactory deal for an option on a large parcel of land north of Spring Green and talked the matter over with Carter Meadows, he would have been very much surprised could he have seen his uncle at that moment.

FOR at that moment, Samuel Halliday was addressing a group of gold rushers in front of a rude shack at Mesa del Oro. Down the quickly-settled crude street of the camp were sights which Halliday had seen in many another gold camp of the Old West.

"An' so," Samuel Halliday was saying, "I'm goin' to give you all a good piece of advice, boys, an' this applies 'specially to all you fellers from Spring Green, Trinchera, an' p'ints up my way. I've lived a long time, an' I l'arned a few things, an' a hull lotta things I never l'arned. But I

b'en a-follerin' th' trail o' gold an' silver many a long year, an' ef I know anything, it's about them things. Thar's a job b'en done down thisaway thet 'ud fool many a man thet's b'en in diggin's afore. But it ain't fooled me. No, siree! An' Sam'l Halliday's a-tellin' you, men an' boys, to turn back to Spring Green as soon as you kin, an' ef you meet any late Spring Greeners a-comin' down thisaway as you go back, tell 'em to turn right 'round an' backtrack to Spring Green.

"An' me, I'm lopin' back to th' Sidin' near Spring Green, so's to pass th' boys th' word up thar—to tell 'em they've been shot off on this wild-goose chase fur a purpose—an' no good purpose, either. The reppitation o' Sam'l Halliday as a panner is back o' what I'm tellin' you about this gold-land, boys, an' the reppitation o' Sam'l Halliday as a citizen o' Spring Green shore oughta convince you that I ain't sayin' what I am through any trickery. A purty smooth job, this is, down thisaway, but it ain't fooled Sam'l Halliday!"

"What all ain't fooled ye?" came a voice. "What all ye talkin' about?"

"I'm talkin' 'bout this strike, as they calls it," said Halliday. "That all's what I'm talkin' about. *It's salted!*"

CHAPTER XVII

THE three days following Samuel Halliday's departure for Mesa del Oro were days of swift happenings. In spite of all that One-Gun could do to dissuade land-owners from selling out, there were large numbers who could not resist the lure of gold, and who insisted upon selling their property for grubstakes.

From his father, Mat had inherited a certain amount of business acumen, which stood him in good stead at this time. With the aid of Meadows and the advice of the banker, Rand, he developed a scheme of operation which would use up as little of Halliday's resources as possible while doing the largest possible amount of business. Instead of buying all lands outright, the office of Meadows, now Nelson and Meadows, for real estate purposes, bought only options on property. An advance of three hundred dollars was paid down on each option, sufficient to serve as a grubstake for those who trusted Halliday for the remainder of their money on Nelson's notes. Titles to the lands would not pass into the name of Samuel Halliday until the time came to close up the option. From all over the countryside came sellers. But Mat had made his surveys. Many of these would-be sellers were turned down by him; and it was almost always true that these people would just as surely be turned down also by Torry on going to Torry after leaving Nelson.

Torry and Wade were not idle as they saw Nelson and Meadows taking the land away from them. Most people would rather sell to the Halliday-Nelson interests regardless of price, than to Torry. But all people were more willing to sell to Nelson since he announced that he would add two hundred dollars to any offer made by Torry and Wade.

By this time word spread rapidly that Lightnin' Wilstead was in Spring Green. The famed gun-fanner was looked upon with awe by the populace, as he sauntered about the scene, apparently unconcerned in the great gold hubbub.

Lightnin' was an old-fashioned gun-fanner. He had enough money to keep him going, and he sneered at prospecting. What did he need a gold mine for? Lightnin' rolled his cigarettes with his left hand and went about his business.

Mat had little time for promenading about the place meaninglessly. He was a busy man. That was why he had not come across Lightnin' Wilstead again, or Keffer. It was the third day after Halliday's departure that the first occurred.

Rand, his daughter Coralie, Meadows and Nelson were at dinner in the Railroad Café. Rand and Meadows sat together, Coralie and Mat facing them and also facing the front of the restaurant. They were already through with the meal, which had been set before them by Dorothy; and Ed Grove was standing at the edge of the table, talking with Rand.

The front door opened. One-Gun looked up, and much to his surprise noticed the lean form of Lightnin' Wilstead leisurely saunter into the Railroad Café. The newcomer swaggered directly up to the table where the four were seated. He looked right at Mat. And he came straight to the point.

"I b'en hearin', Nelson," he said, "thet you b'en sayin' sartin' things 'bout me when my back was turned in this here town. An' I don't allow o' them things—whuther said to my face or behin' my back!"

In a fraction of a second, the probable reason for the man's unprecedented action swept through Mat's mind. He realized that Wade and Torry must have said something to inflame Wilstead against him—that the conspirators realized that something must be done immediately to stir up a gun-fight between himself and Wilstead, now that Wade and Torry had their backs against the wall in the oil matter.

"I reckon you b'en misinformed," he said, quietly. "I'm sayin' I made no remarks about you of any nature whatsoever."

"I reckon I ain't b'en any sech thing!" insisted Wilstead. Coralie Rand and her father had risen, conscious of the menacing tones of the gun-fanner. They walked over to the side of the restaurant, and stood there. Wilstead stood against the chair which Rand had vacated. "I reckon thet's good jedgment, a-leavin' th' table when thar's like to be action," he said, his white-eyelashed black eyes holding a menacing light.

"It was apparent that Lightnin' Wilstead wanted action here at this moment, and action at this moment was exactly what One-Gun wished to avoid. None of the people present would understand the reason, but Mat's reason was a good one. It would have to be a good one to keep Nelson out of a fight. His quick eye noted that the scene was all set. Meadows was sitting over to the side near the wall. No one was between or behind either Wilstead or himself.

"I'm an hombre," Wilstead went on, with his right hand suspiciously near his holster, "as makes no mistakes. Before I opens my mouth, I know what I'm a-sayin' is the truth."

"I ain't sayin'," replied Mat, "as how you ain't tellin' the truth. I'm sayin' that you're like to b'en misinformed, or yo're like to b'en lied to."

"An' I'm a-sayin'," persisted Wilstead, "thet afore I speaks to you, I know I ain't b'en misinformed, an' I ain't b'en lied to."

ONE-GUN, with his palms flat on the table-top, rose to his feet. Then, lifting his arms well away from his hips, he looked Lightnin' Wilstead in the eye. "Wilstead," he said, "I'm a-seein' to it thet no trickery gits me tonight. I'm a-seein' plain thet you come here to start a gun-fight. I'm tellin' you now thet I don't aim to git into any gun-fight tonight. But I will accommodate you when I'm a-hopin you won't leave town afore I git ready."

With that, One-Gun turned on his heel, and walked over to where Rand and his daughter clung to the wall.

"With all yore reppitation, yo're jes' yaller, eh?" sneered Wilstead. "A-turnin' o' yore back on some'un you know's a better man than you are."

Without turning his head, Mat called back over his shoulder to Wilstead: "A man thet's yaller ain't turnin' his back on an hombre like you. I said I wasn't goin' to be tricked into a gun-fight tonight an' I mean what I say. Ef you're goin' to do any shootin' at me tonight, it'll have to be in my back. It won't be the first time thet Torry has tried it. Don't misunderstand me, Wilstead. I'm a-hankerin' to plug you in a fair an' squar' fight. When you walk out o' this room tonight, don't forgit thet I'm askin' you as a special favor, not to mosey outa town till us two shoots it out."

Flabbergasted, yet understanding Nelson's direct intention to make it plain that any bullet fired at him tonight would not be fired in a fight, but that it would be murder, Wilstead could do nothing but retire from the scene as gracefully as possible and await a more auspicious opportunity. With him Wilstead carried the certainty that here was one man, however weird his actions tonight, who did not fear death.

For the first time in his life, One-Gun had maneuvered out of a gun-fight. Not only that, but there were witnesses to his backing away from an affair with Lightnin' Wilstead, and among these witnesses were two women.

When a man like Lightnin' Wilstead walks alone into a room in which a One-Gun Nelson is present, there will always be a number of persons interested in observing such a meeting between two famous gun-fanners. A few such persons had been peering through the windows in this instance. By the time Wilstead stalked out, these sly spectators were well dispersed. They did not know what words had passed between the two men, but they knew that those words could not have been compliments The attitudes of the men proved that.

Inside the restaurant, Coralie Rand was at a loss. The famous One-Gun Nelson

had taken the easiest way out of a bad situation. Was that the way these Western heroes acted in real life—on meeting up with marksmen known to be better than themselves?

There was at least one person in the restaurant, however, who knew what Mat's action had cost him. That person was Dorothy Grove. She knew that it requires more courage to back out of a fight, sometimes, than to swing into action. She felt a world of respect and admiration for Matthew Nelson, the man, rather than the gun-fighter. As a man, she understood plainly now that he had character, just as he had courage as a gun-fighter. And this man was as good as pledged to another woman!

"Skilfully accomplished, Nelson. I congratulate you!"

It was Meadows who spoke. He reached out a hand, which was clasped understandingly by Mat. The tension in the room relaxed.

"My Lord!" exclaimed Coralie Rand, with a sigh of relief. "For a minute I was afraid that I was going to witness one of your wild displays of dueling, such as I've heard about the Wild West. But I'm so glad! If anything had happened, I could never get the bloody scene out of my eyes for the rest of my life!"

A few minutes later the four diners walked out of the Railroad Café together. As they sauntered up the main street, a number of men who had sold their holdings were leaving town on horses, and others stood about with pack-mules and buckboards.

On the door where Nelson and Meadows conducted business, was a sign: "Will be back by 2 o'clock."

Rand looked at his watch. It was one-fifteen; plenty of time for a stroll around town. Meadows was walking ahead with Mr. Rand, while the latter's daughter brought up the rear with One-Gun.

"Luck to ye on thet ile I sold ye, Nelson!" yelled a deserter, shouting from a buckboard to One-Gun. "I'm a-goin' whar thar's gold. Tain't near so sticky, an' you kin spend it with no refinin'."

"Good luck to you," was Mat's answer.

THE party reached the City Hall. The courtroom was still as at the time of the trial, except the only remaining chair was the one on the platform behind the crude table at which Judge Daniels had sat.

Coralie suddenly dug her hand into her purse and brought out an envelope. From this she extracted a group of four snapshot pictures, taken several months earlier by Carter Meadows' camera.

"You sent me these views of Spring Green not long after you first got here, Carter," she said.

The pictures showed four big buildings. "City Hall" was discernible on one, the words written into a stone slab above the door to City Hall. "Court House" was the legend on another slab. On the third picture the reading was "Post Office." And on the fourth, "Fire Department."

"All that I've been able to find is the City Hall," she continued in perplexity. "Who carried off all your other brick buildings?"

One-Gun took a look at the pictures and broke into the heartiest laugh of the year. Meadows joined him.

"See here," explained Carter, "I'll show you." Taking the pictures, he bent them at the edges where the walls of each building came to an end. Then, standing all four up in a square on the table, like four cards, he illustrated the whereabouts of all the buildings.

"These are four different views of one and the same building," he explained. "If you will walk around the building you'll find everything just as you see them in these pictures."

"And you tried to play a hoax like that on us, Carter?" exclaimed Coralie. She felt embarrassed for having been made the butt of a joke. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. As a lawyer, you're the greatest bunco artist I've ever known. You could make a man back East think this was a big town."

"If Carter were as good as that," broke in Rand, "he could have sold me the idea of oil in Spring Green, but he didn't. I just suppose Carter is an honest man with an eye to a good joke."

"I'd have believed him if he had written that he was mayor, out here—the big show-off!" Coralie pouted, pretending to be indignant. "I doubt now whether he'll ever amount to anything."

"No, I don't amount to a thing out here, Coralie," agreed Meadows with hearty good nature. "If I read the signs right, it's Mr. Matthew Nelson, Esquire,

latterly known as One-Gun Nelson, Arizona's fightingest man, who is the big man of these parts."

"Come on, Mat, you're the whole works here; let's see how you look all dressed for your rôle," laughed Meadows.

The group was in a funny mood. Meadows slipped the mail-bag around Mat's shoulder, while One-Gun donned the fire-helmet and sat down at the chair behind the table. Dropping the huge cell key into a blouse pocket, so that the jagged end stood out several inches, he picked up the gavel and pounded the table.

"Order thar in th' senate, ef thet's what this is," he commanded. "What is it a mayor calls to order, Meadows—a senate?" he asked the lawyer.

"No," responded Meadows, "it's a cabinet."

"Order in the cabinet!" demanded Nelson, as Coralie convulsed herself in laughter.

A few more sallies and it was time to depart. Coralie Rand thought better of One-Gun now. It took a man with character, she thought, to show so spontaneous a sense of humor as he had shown, almost immediately after the threats from Lightnin' Wilstead, and with the threat of death still hovering near him. Either Nelson or Wilstead would have his mouth forever sealed within a short time. She shuddered.

MEADOWS broke up her morbid mood by pointing to a side of City Hall. The north wall held a slab of white stone over the big door, reading "Court House." Coralie smiled again. Soon they were on the main street, and the party separated, Mat and Meadows returning to their office.

They were entirely unconscious of what had transpired during their jocular by-play in the City Hall. What had happened was that Lightnin' Wilstead, clumping out of the Railroad Café, knowing by Nelson's own words that Torry's part in the fight baiting was not a secret to One-Gun, crossed diagonally to the offices of Bail-Bond Wade.

Lightnin' Wilstead was a direct man, and a man of action. There was no use in remaining away from Torry. The plan of Torry's was already out of the bag, anyhow.

"An' so he said that?" asked Torry, after listening to Wilstead's narration of events. "But that ain't all there's to it, not by a long shot. You may get a chance at him again, an' you may not. I'm beginnin' to hope that you won't, but I want you to hang around awhile. There's no use tellin' just when you might get a chance to earn your money. Whether you do or not you'll keep the advance you've already got."

Torry was in a magnanimous mood. He was too crafty not to know that he had to be. He stood about as much chance of getting the advance back from Wilstead as he'd stand in shooting it out with Wilstead, and that was what he'd have to do to get back a cent of the money.

"I ain't been livin' on the fat o' the land an' lettin' my brains go rusty since Sam Halliday pulled out o' town," Torry affirmed. "No, sir! Samuel Halliday, respectable citizen of Spring Green, is goin' to get the warmest reception from his home townsfolk that he ever got. And it ain't goin' to be a brass band, either."

The whole harangue had already been rehearsed with Wade, who sat back listening to Clem. Clem knew his cue.

"That gold strike down Mesa del Oro way has been salted, and it ain't goin' to be long before a considerable number o' people find it out," he said. "Well, who salted it? An' why?

"The answer is Samuel Halliday," he continued, passing a bottle to Wilstead. "An' the reason why Samuel Halliday salted it is because there's oil in Spring Green, an' his crooked nephew put him next to the dirty business. O' course, Samuel had to make out that he didn't want the folks to sell their lands, but all the while he knew that no amount of words can stop a gold rush. On top of it all, who bought up ninety-five per cent of the territory? Samuel Halliday himself, with that crooked nephew of his!"

"Something big is coming off in Spring Green, and it's coming off soon," affirmed Wade. "The leaving of Samuel Halliday was the beginning of the end of One-Gun Nelson. Every dog has his day, and the last day of this particular dog—well, it'll soon be dawning!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ONE-GUN NELSON went to bed tired that night, and Meadows also, for the two had put in an extremely busy day. They had taken several options on property, and then, too, Mat had had

the strain of keeping out of a gun-fight with Lightnin' Wilstead when his very fingers itched to pour lead into the hired killer.

But Clem Torry and Bail-Bond Wade were not retiring so early this evening. In the first place, they had done little business today—the whole tide of land-sellers seemed to have turned to Nelson. And Torry and Wade, outwitted at one kind of business, turned to another kind. It was a kind of business they were extremely good at. It was crooked business.

Knowing well that Samuel Halliday was at present in the region of Mesa del Oro, if not even on the way back to warn Spring Greeners to stay away from the salted diggings, Clem Torry decided to get in some very fine work against Halliday during the latter's absence. He could get together an audience very easily at the bar of "The Bank."

Since Halliday would be back with word of the salted diggings at Mesa del Oro, why not beat him with the news, and blame it on Halliday? Why not, indeed?"

The two conspirators walked into "The Bank" bar, ordered drinks, proceeded to drink them, and started in an audible conversation with Rush Merrill, the proprietor. It did not surprise Torry when a rancher, who had been drinking nearby, tapped him on the shoulder and said:

"Did I understan' yo', stranger, to be makin' claims thet them diggin's down Mesa del Oro way was salted? I jes' thought I heard yo' mention them words."

"You was right there, my friend," said Torry. "Have a drink. Rush, give this gentleman here a snort o' the best in the house. Yes," he went on, addressing the rancher, "I got it on good authority that them diggin's down Mesa del Oro way was salted."

"What all could be th' reason fur that?"

"That 'ud be hard for men like you an' me to figger out," admitted Torry, "but I had a talk with a man tonight that, it seems to me, has the right idea. There's a man named Halliday in this town, one o' the richest in town, too, although I ain't sayin' he made his money honest. He knows all about gold-minin', an' saltin' gold-mines, too, I reckon, an'—well, it seems like this salted diggin's turns up to git the people o' Spring Green a-leavin' here just about the time this Halliday—or his nephew, Nelson, they work hand in hand—has the cash ready to buy up the gold-rushers' lands. Oil land it is, too. My pardner an' me, Mr. Wade here, we've bought some land, too, just to help out the citizens to get grub-staked—but we quit buyin' at 10 o'clock this mornin'. That shows, I reckon, how Wade an' me stands on this."

"How didja hear it was salted?" asked the rancher, who now had been joined by two or three more nearby drinkers.

"Well," replied Torry, speaking so that the entire group could hear him, "it don't take long for a man with his ear to the ground to find out things like that. An' then, this Halliday's one o' these pious ol' fellers, or makes out he is, thet can't be trusted far. I'm thinkin' that when the people o' this community find out what this Nelson and Halliday has been up to, there might be such a thing as a rope necktie party in this here section, an' there mightn't be any Judge Daniels in the case this time."

This would be a good piece of leavening for a starter, Torry thought. He gradually sauntered out the door and crossed to the bar of the Atlantic hotel.

Some few minutes later, after talking in much the same key with strangers over at the Atlantic bar, he returned to "The Bank." Inwardly elated, he found that the poison had seeped into the systems of many. The story of the alleged salting of the mine by Halliday had been spread.

Alcohol, and the befuddled brains that went with alcohol, were making the story thrive in the re-telling. Mob sentiment, as usual, was without logic. So successful had been Torry's plan that, under certain conditions, a lynching-party might have been organized right there. Plenty of hotheads lived in and around Spring Green. Perhaps the reason there was no lynching party at this time was founded on the fact that the loud talkers were among those who had not tried to sell their land, or those who had tried and found, as some of them had, that neither Nelson nor Torry would buy it. And yet the indignation of these persons was high, in that their friends and neighbors, it seemed, had been tricked.

ONE GUN was unaware of Torry's smooth propaganda as he rode Silver Dollar to his office next morning. He did notice, however, that wagons were no longer passing through Spring Green.

There were wagons enough, but they were hitched outside "The Bank" or the Atlantic Hotel largely. The migration seemed suddenly to have stopped. And one man from Trinchera, who stood by a wagon—a man who had always greeted him on former occasions, did not greet him noisily or heartily this time. It was Nelson who called a cheery "Howdy." The man hesitated, then nodded gruffly.

Meadows, too, seemed to have noticed the undercurrent of sullenness in the town. "Folks acting queerly today," he said to One-Gun as he entered the office.

But still another clear piece of evidence came when, after an hour of idling and complete lack of business in his office, Mat heard a shot down the street.

He flung open the door of the office, and ran toward the scene. Two men, somewhat the worse for liquor, had been in a gunfight. Fortunately, liquor had been a good thing on this one occasion. Both men had shot wide of each other. Mat recognized one of the men, Paddy Crane, a town character.

"What's up, Paddy?" he asked. "Remember, this gun-fightin' an' gen'ral disorder's got to stop. We're tryin' to have an orderly town here now."

Crane looked surlily over at the man with whom he had had the futile duel. "But sure this lad called ye a dirty thief, Misther Nelson," he answered. "He said it was stealin' from Spring Green you was, an' I thought I'd shoot the words down his throat. Sure, you're no thief!"

"That's true enough, I reckon," said Mat. "But remember now, no matter what anyone says, no fightin' or brawlin'. We want order in this town."

It was plain to him now that there had been some concerted effort to discredit himself and his uncle in Spring Green. He found more evidences of it when he went to his dinner at the Railroad Café.

Passing down the street he happened to run into Bail Bond Wade. The latter had the unbounded brass to nod and pass a greeting. Nelson was astounded at the effrontery of the man. It was evident that he and Torry were back of these malicious stories that Mat and his uncle were trying to make money out of the misfortunes of Spring Green citizens; and here was Wade, actually smiling and nodding to him on the street. The incident made him burn inwardly. If, as he entered the Railroad Café, he had met Lightnin' Wilstead this time, that quick-fingered gentleman might not have pined futilely for some finger-exercise on this occasion.

But Wilstead was nowhere about, it seemed, and after a quiet talk with Dorothy Grove, Mat got up from his chair, rolled a cigarette and walked back toward his office.

He felt sure now that his uncle had gone down to Mesa del Oro to examine the diggings, and that without doubt it was he himself, highly experienced in all forms of gold-mining, who had learned that the diggings had been salted. Somehow word had seeped back to Torry, apparently, through one of his spies, and now Torry was turning his own guilt back upon honest old Samuel Halliday.

The sky had turned overcast, and somehow it seemed to make appear even more sullen the faces of unfriendly looking men that he passed. Mat hoped the day would pass without any untoward incident, for perhaps within a few hours the vanguard of the returning gold-rushers would reach Spring Green, and they would be only too glad to vindicate Samuel Halliday.

But One-Gun would not have felt so hopeful of the situation if he had known that already Torry and Wade had despatched several horsemen to take the road leading out of Spring Green to the south. These horsemen would sooner or later run into the returning gold-rushers from Mesa del Oro. They would spread the story that Halliday had salted the claim—and tell of his purpose, to get hold of the rich oil-lands about the town. This would add fuel to the fire. Yes, this, in the opinion of Wade and Torry, would be pretty near enough.

CHAPTER XIX

SAMUEL HALLIDAY, surrounded by a group of some eighteen or twenty riders, was on the last leg of the trail back to Spring Green. It was early morning, four days after his departure from home. He had gone down to Mesa del Oro by train, but decided to return on horseback, because on the way back he expected to meet a stream of late rushers who would have to be warned and turned back to their homes before the loss of time and money.

He was on a borrowed mount. Five men

had left the salted gold-beds with him. The others in the party were those who had been turned back in their tracks by Halliday's warnings. Many others who had been warned, however, had nevertheless continued on their way to Mesa del Oro.

"I ain't makin' any accusations, Jake," Halliday was saying to Jake Eddy, at his side. "Thet ain't my way t' accuse anybody behind his back. When I have anything to say—an' I'll have plenty, mind ye—I say it where it'll do th' most good. I say it t' th' parties consarned first."

Halliday and his companions had spent the night at San Miguel, starting out before sunrise for home. With few delays they should get back about two in the afternoon. From time to time they stopped a few moments to argue with riders bound for the strike, sometimes to good avail but again to no purpose. The party was about twenty strong and only six miles out of Spring Green when four men on horses approached them on their way out of the township and toward gold.

"Salt!" called out Halliday, as they drew near. "Better turn back right now. All these fellers came back with me, and the rest is comin' on behind; prob'ly spreadin' all over the road by this time, not more'n five-mile back, an' stretchin' all th' way down to Mesa del Oro."

"Reckon we'll take our chance," said one of the four.

Halliday knew nothing about it, of course, but these were the men who had been sent out by Torry to rouse the returning refugees against Halliday and Nelson.

At two o'clock Halliday's party picked up upper Pueblo Creek and at two-thirty the party rode into Spring Green, down the main street, to "The Bank" saloon. Halliday left his companions and made directly for the offices of Meadows, where he knew that his nephew would be. Halliday already noticed that something was wrong. Not a word of greeting had been thrown to him as he rode past a number of townsmen.

Dismounting, he tied his animal and walked with dignity into the office.

"Salted!" announced Samuel Halliday. "Jest as I figgered!"

"I'll lock the door and we won't be disturbed," said Meadows. "We're going to have a great deal to talk over apart from your discovery, Mr. Halliday. We have made some discoveries ourselves."

"Yes," said Mat, as the three seated themselves. "Thar's b'en more salted than jest a gold-strike. They've also salted that it's you, me, an' Meadows here as salted the strike!"

Samuel Halliday opened his eyes and mouth wide, started to say something, then slumped back into his chair in silence. It was not a gesture of dejection. For the first time in many years there was a glint of meanness in the eyes of Samuel Halliday. This was no longer a battle in which his nephew would do all the active work. Samuel Halliday was to be placed in the front ranks of the fighters. And he knew how to fight. When Samuel Halliday spread on his war-paint, he showed no quarter.

THROUGH the windows the three men saw figures moving hurriedly. Men were rushing, it seemed, toward some central point. Nelson and Meadows walked to the front to find the cause of commotion. Diagonally across the street, in front of the Bank, was a large congregation of people. A few women also were present. On the gallery leading into "The Bank" stood Clem Torry, addressing the crowd.

"I'll go out and listen to what he is saying," said Meadows, "while you remain here with your uncle and decide things for yourselves. If there's any disorder you'll hear it, but if it's only a battle of words, I'm a match for Clem Torry."

Mat returned to Halliday as Meadows slammed the door and made his way toward "The Bank" gallery. If Mat had remained a moment longer at the window he would have seen that Meadows was having a hard time elbowing his way through the crowd; a number of men seemed openly inimical, doing much to impede his progress and refusing to budge an inch for him. Glowering eyes burned through his back and sides. But One-Gun was already talking with his uncle.

"Coyote," Meadows heard somebody say, as he elbowed deeper and deeper. The epithet, he knew, had been hurled at him. But he was not a coward. He reached the front row.

"An' then what happens?" Torry was shouting. "Samuel Halliday, knowin' that all you men trust him, turns traitor to your trust an' betrays you like a dirty snake!"

A party of disappointed prospectors, headed by one of the four outriders despatched by Torry, wound its way to the group. The speaker on the platform felt a surge of triumphant emotion, for his glance at the faces of the newcomers told him a story. His messengers in this case had done his work.

"Halliday, a double-faced liar an' hypocrite," continued Torry, "salts the strike, then stays here an' pretends to keep you from sellin' your lands. He knew all the time that the hardest thing in the world is to keep men from rushin' for gold when there's a strike. But when some of you took his false advice to remain, he feared that not enough would go; so he leaves town himself, to set you an example while his nephew remains to buy up your lands with Halliday money. Samuel Halliday knew that there was a fortune under your feet here, and you didn't know it. For years he planned to rob you of it Then, when I came, and he got afraid that the jig was up, he imports his nephew for the last piece of dirty work. He takes the last big chance. It would make him or break him. And by God! I'm here to tell all you honest men who have been robbed in this slimy manner that this last dirty trick is goin' to break him, his nephew, his sheriff, Meadows, an' every man an' dog connected with him!"

"An' I'm here t' agree with ye," came a determined voice. The owner of the voice, before he was through speaking, reached forward with two powerful hands and grabbed Carter Meadows before the sheriff had a chance to raise an arm in self-defense. In a moment, more arms were round him, and his gun removed. The first act of violence took effect on the minds of the mob, who made a concerted effort toward the scene.

It was a wretched demonstration of the brutality of worked-up men, of mob violence. Blow after blow rained down upon the overpowered and defenseless form of the little sheriff. Rat—thief—c'yote—rattler—skunk—sidewinder—every piece of opprobrium in Arizona showered down on his head. Another detachment of miners arrived. Desire for action was in their every feature.

"Lynch him!" somebody yelled.

"Lynch 'im!" the cry spread.

"I'll git a rope," said an infuriated ruffian near the unconscious form of the sheriff. "You fellers carry 'im t' yonder post!"

But by this time another actor appeared on the scene. The cries of "Lynch him!" had not gone round in whispers. The new actor, consequently, was none other than One-Gun Nelson, rushing out from the office of Carter Meadows.

Hardly had he turned toward the scene when a breathless girl dashing down the walk almost bowled into him.

"Save him! Save him!" she cried. "Quick!"

It was Dorothy Grove.

Like a flash, One-Gun streaked toward the bullies who were dragging the inert body through the dust. Like a flash, a right and a left fist lashed out, and two men toppled into the road. Like a flash, Mat stood over the outstretched form of Carter Meadows, gun in hand, lips pursed in lines of death, steel-blue eyes flaming threats of instant annihilation to any interference.

"The first man t' take one step is a dead man!" said Mat. He did not shout. But not an ear in all the great mob failed to understand the full import of the command.

Dorothy Grove now bent over the prostrate sheriff.

Samuel Halliday, primed for action, had followed Mat to the street and toward the post. A few yards away, on the fringe of the crowd, he caught a furtive movement.

It was only a little movement, but an eye trained for just such movements does not fail to catch them. Halliday recognized the mover. It was Plug Keffer, hidden behind the last row of spectators, drawing a gun and levelling it directly at One-Gun.

There was a bark, and a curl of smoke. A man dropped to earth.

The bark came from a gun in the hands of Samuel Halliday; and the dead man was Plug Keffer, whose weapon clattered to the ground for the last time.

The multitude was awed. There were old-timers there, men who recalled that when Samuel Halliday was fighting he showed no quarter. They remembered that now, as Plug Keffer's lifeless body lay flat on the roadside.

The shot had been just the thing needed for a breaking point. Nelson, knowing full well that no hand would now be turned against Meadows, and certain that in the

hands of Dorothy, and Coralie, who had also made an appearance, the sheriff would be safe, ran for the gallery of "The Bank" saloon and with a leap stood side by side with Clem Torry.

"Now, I'm a-goin' t' tell you somethin', gents," he said, "an' I ain't goin' to wait for no applause. My gun is in my hand, an' not fur nuthin'. It's goin' to stay thar, till somebody here sees the light o' reason, an' truth.

"I don't know what Torry's b'en a-tellin' you, but I'm a-tellin' you thet whatever he said, Clem Torry is a liar!"

CHAPTER XX

NELSON did not speak long. When One-Gun, in a fighting mood, started out to show somebody the light of reason, he showed that light in the fewest possible words. So rapt were his listeners that they hardly noticed the slinking form of Clem Torry as that individual stepped off the gallery and walked away along the side of the building. Mat saw it, but took no notice of it. As the eyes of the audience began to show a change of convictions, One-Gun put his weapon back in its holster. It was a little act, but a winning one.

During the five minutes that Mat addressed the mob, Torry wasted no time. He drew up beside Lightnin' Wilstead. Torry was in a state of desperation.

"Now's your chance, Lightnin'," he said, feverishly. "I can't let him get started, an' turn that mob against us. It's worth a lot to me, Lightnin'. Git 'im now—quick—an' it's worth ten thousand dollars to you."

"Ten thousand dollars?" said Lightnin'.

"That's what I said. Quick."

"Put thet in writin'," ordered Wilstead. "Write out 'I.O.U. ten thousan' dollars in gold.' Date an' all."

Torry was blank in amazement.

"G'wan," said Lightnin'. "I ain't takin' no chances on my dinero with an hombre as pays fur killin's. Write it out. Then I gits 'im, an' I collects. Ef he kills me, thar won't be anybody t' collect. Sabe?"

Torry followed instructions to the letter, quickly writing on the back of an envelope, and addressing the note to Lightnin' Wilstead by name. Wilstead put the note in his blouse pocket and started for the gallery of "The Bank" saloon.

"Clem Torry an' Bail-Bond Wade brung snipers, gun-fighters, murderers," Mat was saying. "I kin prove to you thet Clem Torry sent out th' rattler thet killed Jase Flint. An' right now thar's another gun-fanner in our midst. He's a paid killer, an' he's here t' blow a hole in me. His name is Lightnin' Wilstead!"

"What's thet?"

It was Lightnin' Wilstead, who had climbed to the gallery just as Nelson completed his sentence.

"I said thet yo're a paid killer, Wilstead, an hombre thet takes money from dirty, side-windin' varmint like Clem Torry, fur purposes o' killin' men thet you figger you kin beat on th' draw!"

"Hombre," said Lightnin', coolly, "them words is agoin' t' cost you yore yaller life. Ye sneak out'n one fight with me like a yaller c'yote, but yo're not agoin' to git out'n this 'un. I'm a-tellin' ye afore a thousan' witnesses thet I'm goin' to kill ye in a fair fight in no time at all, a-kill ye fbr insultin' o' me."

"I'm a-hearin' you—Snail Wilstead!"

The crowd heard. Even in the tensity that had gripped them there was a guffaw—an hysterical guffaw. The grotesque paradox of Lightnin' being called "Snail" was enough to bring a laugh to the mouth of the populace standing before the spectre of known and instant death.

To this day there are white heads in Arizona, heads that then were thatched with the sheen of youth, that shake weirdly as their owners tell the story of that gun-fight, and hands ready to swear that elements of magic figured in the gun-fight on that memorable day between Lightnin' Wilstead and One-Gun Nelson. Not an honest man among the thousands of spectators actually saw the draws made by the two opponents. Magic brought forth triggers to the index fingers of the fighters. Almost before a hand was seen to move, a shot was fired.

A body stiffened, an arm crooked, a wrist dropped, and a gun fell to the wooden floor. The body crumpled and collapsed. One-Gun Nelson, smoking weapon in hand, had fired the only shot. Only the clattering of his gun on the wood proved that Wilstead also had drawn. The closest observers, among them the very men who had beaten Meadows into unconsciousness, later admitted that Wilstead's hand had been nearer the holster than Nelson's.

Only a second elapsed before the mightiest cheer ever heard in Spring Green spread the throats of a thousand men and rolled and echoed across the flats and hollows of the sandy plains.

Mat turned once more to address the crowd.

"Gents," he began, motioning for the cheering to cease, "I b'en postponin' a-meetin' this unfortunate man, Wilstead, for jes' one reason. He had a reppitation as a gunfanner, an' while I wasn't a-fearin' of him, I didn't keer to take no chance when a-doin' so might cost you gentlémen yore money an' yore lands. 'Cause ef I'd been plugged, the Torry gang 'ud have ruined Spring Green an' Spring Greeners. Now, I have only one thing more to say. Any man amongst you who sold his lands to Samuel Halliday over in yonder office whar Carter Meadows conducted our business, kin jes' turn back the money I gave him, an' we'll tear up every option made. I'm a-goin' to begin right now by tearin' up th' option o' Ed Grove."

Again the cheering rang out, as One-Gun drew a slip of paper from his pocket and tore it to shreds before them.

"Give Nelson the leases!" shouted someone. "Give 'im the leases!"

"I reckon," he said, "thet you jes' saw thet citizen hand me up a paper an' ask me to make an announcement. I will. In draggin' down th' body o' Wilstead, somebody got impatient. I ain't commendin' th' party thet made th' search afore it was permitted by th' law, but I'm a-goin' to read to you right here an' now what evydence was found."

Mat held up a slip of paper, an envelope, which had been handed to him during the excitement. The silence of expectation reigned among the onlookers.

"'I.O.U., Lightnin' Wilstead, ten thousand dollars in gold.' It is dated today, gents, an' signed — gentlemen, it is signed—'Clem Torry'!"

"Git 'im! Git Clem Torry," came shouts.

But the mob was blocked. Gun in hand, Samuel Halliday stood before the stairway leading up to Wade's office, where he had seen Torry enter.

"Law an' order pervails in this town," shouted Mat, who already had leaped from the gallery and run beside his uncle.

"We surrender," came a voice from within.

Over Halliday's shoulder stood the form of Clem Torry, on the stairway.

"Speak for yourself, Torry," came another voice. The words were followed by a shot. Bail-Bond Wade, immediately behind his henchman, slouched to the steps. A smoking pistol in his hand told the story. He had fired a bullet into his own brain.

Under the protection of One-Gun Nelson, followed by a mob of blood-thirsty townsmen, Clem Torry was escorted to the City Hall and was placed in the cell which had recently incarcerated Plug Keffer. This time there was no Bail-Bond Wade to liberate a man destined to the end of a

IT was the fortune of Matthew Nelson and Samuel Halliday. To operate only half the lands in question on a lease basis would mean a fortune of millions of dollars. Here was ninety-five per cent of the oil-lands at the command of Nelson and Halliday. That Lemmon and Meadows would be in on it, was a foregone conclusion.

"Jes' one minute," shouted Mat, above the mob. The din ceased.

And in conclusion:

We think you ought to know that the January issue of

DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

will be an all star issue—

ZANE GREY

tops the list . . .

"The Sheriff of Golden Bar," a complete 75,000 word novel by Wm. Patterson White, runs it a close second. And it will have its regular short stories and features.

Remember, besides this stirring ZANE GREY serial, you will still get *the usual 75,000 word novel* in each issue.

rope. And this man's own written evidence stood ready to help convict him.

Taking the liberty to deputize Jake Eddy as a special guard, Mat handed Eddy the key.

A few words to the mob, and they also agreed to wait for the pleasure of the first legal hanging in Spring Green within thirty years.

Mat turned to Halliday.

"I'm a-goin' over t' see how Carter's gittin' along," he said. "I'd like to eat at home tonight, Uncle Sam'l, whar thar ain't like to be no interferin' with the digestion. I reckon as how Manuel is back in th' kitchen by this time, so I'd thank you t' warn Manuel thet I got a heap o' appetite tonight."

Halliday laughed, slapped his nephew on the shoulder, and turned toward home.

One-Gun stepped through the crowd and walked his fastest over to the Railroad Café.

He ascended the stairway to the second floor, and rapped on the door. He knew that Carter Meadows had been brought here for medical attention.

As Dorothy Grove opened the door for him, Mat could see the slender form of Coralie Rand bowed over the inert body of Carter Meadows. At the sound of the newcomer crossing the threshold, the Omaha girl turned.

"Oh, Mr. Nelson!" she said, softly. "Mr. Nelson! How in the world can I ever, ever thank you—for what you have done today—for me?"

"It wa'n't nothin', Miss," said Mat. "Is he—is he all right?"

"He'll be all right," said Coralie. "Did you meet Dr. Travers?"

"No," said Mat.

"I thought you might. He just left, after taking a great load off my heart. Carter had a miraculous escape—due to you. The most serious thing is a slightly fractured arm and a scalp wound, which the doctor says will clear up very nicely. If it hadn't been for you—I hate to think of it! But thank you! Oh, thank you!"

The girl's violet eyes were swimming in tears.

"He is—is so much to me," she sobbed. "Oh, I'm sorry I can't control my feelings, but—oh, I'm so happy. You—you saved me today from being—a—a widow."

Mat Nelson stood staring.

"A—a what, ma'am?" he asked, his mouth agape. "Did I understan' you to say a widdah? You an' Carter ain't—"

"We were secretly married just before he came here," said Coralie. "Even dad didn't know it till just before we started. No one knew it except just us two—and Dorothy, who was so kind and friendly to Carter out here, who had been almost like a sister to him. And who, of course, kept the secret. Dorothy would."

One-Gun felt his senses reeling. He looked up at Dorothy Grove.

"An' I thought," he said, "I thought—Aw, Miss Dorothy, what fools men kin be. I thought thet you an' him—"

Dorothy shook her head. "No, Mat," she said. "As Coralie said, I kept his secret. Do you remember, one time, I told you that I knew more about Mr. Meadows than anyone in Spring Green? And women can be fools, too, Mat. I reckon," she added, a trifle wistfully, "that now you are practically the head and front of Spring Green, you'll bring your fiancée here."

"My what?" asked Mat.

"The girl that Mr. Halliday mentioned," said Dorothy.

"Thet Uncle Sam mentioned? I ain't got a gal nowhere! I ain't no ladies' man."

"He told me," said Dorothy, "that once you told him that you had met a girl whom you loved, I suppose he meant, but—"

Mat suddenly lost any bashfulness that this young man may have had at times in the presence of women. He drew Dorothy Grove into the room connected with the one in which Carter Meadows was lying, with Mrs. Carter Meadows kneeling beside him.

"Dorothy," he said, "I did say somethin' like thet to Uncle Sam, I reckon. But it was you I meant. Not thet I'm gittin' what you might call forward, Miss Dorothy. I jes' meant—"

But Dorothy Grove seemed to be swaying; in fact, seemed to be swaying toward One-Gun Nelson; and there was that in her eyes which even One-Gun, unlearned of women, could not fail to understand.

"Aw, Dorothy!" he cried. "Dorothy!"

Outside, in the sun-baked street, could be heard an occasional shout, an occasional cheer, for One-Gun Nelson. "The Bank" saloon would do a big business tonight, the Atlantic bar; raucous voices would be raised in ribald song and coarse laughter. But inside this humble little room was love and understanding.

Trigger Fingers

Complete Novelette

By Harry Sinclair Drago

CHAPTER I

SCREENED by the tumble-down house on the deserted Lazy A ranch, two miles south of Laguna, six men waited this morning. There was a tense, strained look about them that deepened as the minutes fled.

With one exception, they were a hard-bitten crew, with a price on their heads dead or alive, for they were none other than Little Bill Santry and his long riders. Against the youngest, Curly Johnson, the law as yet had no grudge.

Repeatedly their attention strayed to the road.

"Damn near the time Crescent got here," said one. It was Link Garrett, veteran of a score of daring bank robberies and train hold-ups. Even in that company of case-hardened souls his words commanded respect. He had been riding with Little Bill for two years. "I don't pretend to know what's keepin' him, but if he don't show in a few minutes, I'm thinkin' we'd better pull out, Bill."

"He'll be along," said Little Bill, a grizzled five-footer with the small hands and feet of a woman. His faded blue eyes narrowed to a piercing squint as he flashed another glance at the road. He was not young any more. "These things always

work out, Link, just like anythin' else. No reason to think anythin' has gone wrong because he's a few minutes late."

"Mebbe so you're right," Link grumbled. "I'd like it better if he was here. You never sent him in ahead of us to size things up before. You've always done it yourself."

"Well, Bill was in Laguna yesterday," Flash Chaney exclaimed impatiently. He had a reputation for being ice in a pinch. "He says we're all set, don't he?"

"Then why send Crescent in this mornin'?" Link demanded sullenly.

"I'll tell you why," Little Bill answered. "I'm playin' this one as safe as I know how, Link. We're pretty far north for us. When we ride out of Laguna we'll have close on to a hundred miles ahead of us before we can get across the Cimarron bottoms, and we can't figger we're in the clear a foot this side of the river.

"We been all over that," Link reminded him. "I ain't got no kick about what's ahead of us. I'm just sayin' that as long as you thought somebody ought to go in this mornin' for a last look around, you should have gone yourself."

"The only reason I didn't was because I thought Clinton might begin to ask himself questions if he saw me hangin' around."

"Yeh?" Link's tone was skeptical. "Was that your idea or Crescent's?"

"He might have mentioned it," Little Bill admitted. "But it was right in line with what I was thinkin'. A marshal who can make his brag stick for two years that a bank can't be hoisted in his town ain't no fool. I don't figger anythin's happened over night to change our stand at all; but it was worth sendin' a man in to find out. Crescent's a stranger in Laguna—"

"So he says." There was an insinuation in Link's tone that brought all of them up sharply.

"Do you know different?" the Yuma Kid demanded, clipping the words off hostilely. He was a tall, rangy man who had lived the greater part of his life outside the law.

"I know he was damn anxious to go into town," Link shot back at him, "and he never was before! I wasn't the only one that noticed it. Jack got it."

"Is that right, Cactus?" Little Bill asked.

"Oh, I may have said somethin'," Cactus Jack muttered deprecatingly. "It wa'n't nothin' personal. Crescent is all right, I guess. He wouldn't dare to be any other way with us. I reckon this will be him now."

"It's him, all right," Little Bill announced a second later.

"Yeh, and he's sure takin' his time," Link growled. "He's half-an-hour late."

"Better lay off him when he gets in," Bill advised. "We'll just take it easy. I don't want to walk into that bank before nine-thirty. They'll have the safe open by then and the money kinda spread out." He turned to Curly. "You better get the team hitched now," he advised. "We'll be movin' out of here directly."

Curly nodded and said nothing as he started for the hitch-rack where the team stood. His face was strained with excitement, his lips bloodless. He was about to take a step that would place him among wanted men, and it was that, and not the dangerous touch-and-go with death of the next hour, that weighed so heavily on him.

Little Bill watched him for a minute and then walked over to him.

"Curly, your nerves are beginnin' to snarl," he said. "If you've changed your mind about anythin' and don't want to go through with this, just say so. It will be all right; I can get along without you."

"Huh, you don't think I'd back out now, do you? I'll be all right as soon as we get movin'." Curly managed a smile that showed his even white teeth, but his level gray eyes did not lose their troubled look.

Little Bill continued to regard him with keen scrutiny as Curly hitched the team to the wagon. "You know I didn't want you in this at all," he said, and some of the grimness was gone from his face. "You don't owe me nothin,' Curly. Anythin' I did for you was done because I like you. You don't have to let that get in the way."

"I don't know whether it's gettin' in my way or not," Curly murmured soberly, "but I ain't forgettin' that when I was laid up flat on my back with a broken leg and not a cent to my name, you came through for me. That Box U outfit I was workin' for wouldn't even get me a doctor."

"Now see here," Little Bill scolded, "you don't have to throw it up to me again about my doin' somethin' for you. I've told you before it wasn't nothin' at all. I get my money pretty easy."

"Yeh, I know how easy you get it," Curly remarked with bitter irony.

"Well, I won't argue with you," Little Bill snapped fiercely. "Your leg's all right again. The thing for you to do is to drift down into Texas or some new country and get yourself a job—and save your money this time."

Curly pretended to laugh. "After all that moralizing it's about time to pass the collection box, ain't it?"

"Funny, eh?" Little Bill rasped. "Well, you can't laugh yourself out of it with me. If we have any luck today I'm goin' to give you a stake and chase you out of this country. If I ever catch you back in Oklahoma again I'll rawhide the life out of you. You can drive the team over in back of the kitchen now."

Crescent was riding into the yard. Little Bill turned away to meet him. Curly called him back.

"Bill, you ain't tryin' to get rid of me because you're afraid I'll crack and spoil your play—are you?"

"No, I wasn't thinkin' of that; you'll be cool enough. I was just lookin' ahead a little. It's an awful good thing to do now and then." Without another word he turned on his heels and hurried across the yard as Crescent Campeau slid out of his saddle.

There was more than a dash of Cherokee blood in Crescent, and it was reflected in his high cheekbones and cruel mouth. He was a vain, swaggering individual. For years he had been running wild between Fort Smith and Santa Fe, robbing and plundering with one gang or another.

"Well, you're back," Little Bill exclaimed. "What made you so late? Anythin' wrong?"

"Not a thing, Bill." Crescent rolled a ciagrette with a flourish. "I went in to have a look, and I had a good one." Link's open hostility and Cactus Jack's vague distrust had not escaped him. An insolent smile curled his lips as he glanced at them. "You hombres seem to be takin' it pretty hard," he jeered. "I suppose you were worried about me—"

"And I'm goin' to keep right on worryin' about you," Link promised him.

"Come on," Little Bill rasped as they glared at each other. "I'm waitin' to hear what you found out, Crescent."

Campeau welcomed the interruption. "Why, I found things just as you said I would," he declared.

"No strangers in town?"

"No—"

"None of that feelin' in the air that they're waitin' for somethin' to happen?"

"Why no! All I could see was just a cow town gettin' ready for another long hot day."

Little Bill had a score of questions to ask. They concerned Luke Clinton, the town marshal, and such apparently irrelevant things as whether or not the morning train west was marked up on time.

"She was on time leavin' Pawnee," Crescent informed him.

"Then she'll be on time gettin' into Laguna. That train's goin' to play an awful important part in our lives this mornin'." Little Bill rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "I guess that covers it," he said. He glanced at each of them in turn for some sign of confirmation. "Anybody got anythin' to say?"

"We're waitin' on you, Bill," Yuma answered.

Little Bill's eyes were fixed on Link.

"All right," the big fellow agreed grudgingly. "I guess it's okay."

The others nodded their assent. Flash glanced at his watch. It was just nine o'clock.

"We can put our rifles in the wagon," said Bill. The box was filled with wild hay; about the quantity a rancher would take into town to feed his team. "Just be sure you know where they are," he warned. "We may have to go for 'em in a hurry."

The guns were quickly concealed.

"Now," Little Bill announced. "I'll give you our play. Crescent will drive the team in. He'll pull out of here first and we'll time ourselves to pass him just about as he drives across the tracks into town. He'll draw up in front of the bank, hitch the team

and go into that little eatin' place next the bank." He turned to Crescent. "You'll be watchin' through the windows. If nothing goes wrong, you stay inside until we come out. If we stub our toe, you come out with your six-guns smokin'. Curly will be holdin' the horses around to the side of the bank. Your pony will be there. You got all that?"

"Sure—"

"All right! Cactus and Flash will cover the bank door. Yuma, you'll be at the corner of the bank. When we come out, throw yourself into the ditch and cover us until we get into our saddles. Is that plain?"

"Yeh—"

"You boys want to keep your eyes peeled," Little Bill ran on. "Link and me will go in. We won't be long, but if ever'thin' is workin' out our way, we'll time it so we won't step out until that west bound train is pullin' out. Folks won't be thinkin' of the bank just then. We may be able to reach our horses without firin' a shot."

"Say, has it occurred to you that the train may stop so it'll block the road and bottle us up?" Link replied.

"It might," Little Bill agreed, "but it ain't in the habit of doin' that. If that happens we'll go out of town on the road beside the bank and cut across the tracks as soon as we can. I'm hopin' we won't have to do that. I figger we can cross the tracks right at the depot and as the train pulls out, keep it between us and the gents who'll be tryin' to cut us down. Now there's just one thing more; the ordinary run of folks don't get very excited about seein' somebody else's bank robbed. Shootin' down innocent citizens is somethin' else again. Just remember that. When we pull away from the bank our guns will be a poppin'. But that'll be just a little argument against followin' us."

"That's if ever'thin' goes right," Link jerked out. "Otherwise—"

"You'll shoot to kill—every time!" Little Bill turned to Crescent. "You can pull out now. Just jog the team along and don't worry about us; we'll be right behind you."

Campeau picked up the reins and drove out. Little Bill let him have a start of half a mile before he gave the order to mount. Presently they were riding away. Curly rode in the rear. Bill dropped back beside him as they reached the Mexican shacks at the edge of town.

"You all right?" Curly's face was chalky under its tan.

"Yeh," he nodded, his throat tight. He could see the bank, just beyond the railroad tracks. Around the depot there were signs of activity already. "The train can't be due yet—"

" 'Bout twelve minutes. I can see a little smoke over there to the east."

"You're drawin' it awful fine, ain't you?" Curly got out tonelessly.

"That's the way I want to draw it," Little Bill answered. His grizzled, weather-beaten face was suddenly a stony mask. "Robbin' a bank is just the same as anythin' else; either you do or you don't. Keep your head now for a few minutes, and remember no matter what happens your place is with the horses. We'll be countin' on you to have 'em ready."

CHAPTER II

THE train was whistling for Laguna as they walked their horses across the tracks. Crescent was just ahead of them. They passed him a moment later without any sign of recognition.

The crowd gathered on the station platform evinced no interest in them, apparently believing them to be just cowboys riding in from some distant ranch. It was an encouraging sign.

"All right so far," Little Bill volunteered.

"Yeh, but take a look at that street," Link muttered apprehensively. "Ought to be more people in sight for this time of the day."

Bill looked and saw that the main street of Laguna was almost deserted. His jaws clicked together sharply.

"What do you make of it?" Link demanded fiercely. The others were instantly on edge.

"I don't know," Bill answered, glancing up one side of the street and down the other. "Don't lose your heads now; it may not mean a thing."

"You know what it usually means," Link droned.

"That we're expected?"

"Yeh! You don't see anybody hanging around the bank where they might stop a little lead."

"Aw pull yourself together," Yuma blazed. "Nothin' has been right with you all mornin'. Now you're ready to believe there's been a tip-off just because you don't see a flock of people standin' around. We're here and we're goin' through with our stand."

"Ain't no question about that," Little Bill informed them. "If this is a jackpot, we're walkin' into it with our eyes wide open. If things get tough we'll get tough with 'em."

They turned into the little-used road that paralleled the side of the bank building. Twenty-five feet from the corner they slid out of their saddles. Curly gathered up the bridle reins.

Little Bill flicked a glance at Curly. "Plenty iron there," he muttered as he fell into step with Link. Cactus Jack and Flash were a step behind them. Yuma brought up the rear.

Even as Curly held his breath they reached the corner of the bank. Yuma pulled up; the others passed from sight. Each second had suddenly become hours long.

In back of him, across an open space, was the depot. He could be picked off easily enough from there. But no one seemed interested in him. With steam pipes hissing and brake irons grinding, the westbound was rattling into Laguna. He didn't know it, but the train carried an extra coach this morning; the division superintendent's car.

The train moved slower and slower as the engineer put on the air. Curly's blood ran cold as he watched the rear car edge up to the street. It was barely moving now, and it still blocked the way!

"We'll never make it," he groaned.

There was a dumb appeal in his eyes as he glanced at the engineer. Three or four feet might make all the difference in the world to them. He held his breath. He couldn't be sure the train had not already come to a stop. But it hadn't; inch by inch it crawled on until he could see one of the shacks beyond the track.

"We can squeeze through!" he sighed as he drew a deep breath into his bursting lungs.

Yuma stood with his back to the bank building. His attention was riveted on the hotel across the corner and the hardware store next to it. Suddenly Curly saw his hands flash to his guns. He didn't draw, but he stood at rigid attention, every inch of him alert.

Across the street, Curly noticed that the door of the hotel stood wide open. It had not been open a moment ago. He knew Yuma's attention was fixed on it. From that doorway the bank entrance could be raked with fire.

With his pulse pounding madly, Curly's imagination pictured graphically what was taking place; the wagon standing so innocently in front of the bank; Cactus and Flash backed up against the entrance; Yuma at the corner, telegraphing them a warning; Crescent watching from the little restaurant; Little Bill and Link marching up to the cashier's cage.

Although he saw it so clearly in his mind, he had one detail wrong. Crescent was in the restaurant, but his attention was centered on the back door rather than on what was taking place in front of the bank.

"Bill and Link certainly must be makin' their play by now," he assured himself. "The train will be pullin' out in a minute or two—"

His surmise was correct; Little Bill and Link had continued past the bank as far as the Bud saloon. They had turned back then, their eyes everywhere. They were stepping inside now.

Bill was first in. Link was only a few feet behind him. When he reached the counter used by the bank's customers for making out checks and deposits, he stopped. Aside from the two men in the cage, they appeared to have the bank to themselves.

Suddenly Little Bill's guns seemed to leap into his hands. Link was only a split second behind him.

"Come on, open up!" Little Bill com-

manded as he covered the two men. Their teeth were chattering. "Take it easy and you won't get—" The words died in his throat. Crouched on the floor behind the counter were five armed men. One of them was Luke Chilton, the town marshal.

Bill's eyes bulged incredulously even after the truth crashed through his brain.

"Stick up your hands!" Chilton cried. "You're dead men if you move."

Little Bill had not waited. His guns spat viciously as he leaped back. Crouching low, he reached Link's side. No orders were necessary. A rifle barrel appeared above the counter. With no better target to aim at, they began to fan their guns.

There was a moment's lull, and then hell seemed to break loose. Chilton had leaped to the corner of the cage, pumping a .30-.30 as fast as they could work the bolt. His deputies threw caution away, and standing up, began to fire.

Across the street, a man ran to the hotel door and drew a rifle to his shoulder. Yuma dropped him before he could pull the trigger. Then next moment, however, another man appeared, and throwing himself flat on the porch, began to pour a withering fire into the bank entrance.

Flash went down, rolled around and finally lay still. Cactus reached into the wagon for their rifles. He fumbled around with his hand and could not find them.

Yuma was stretched out in the ditch, firing at the hotel. "Fetched him that time!" he yelled as the man on the porch dropped his gun.

Crescent had not appeared. Crouching down beside the wagon, Cactus Jack looked for him and saw him running out the back door of the restaurant. "The dirty rat!" he groaned. It was only a chance, but he fired through the window at him. The slug spun Crescent around, evidently getting him in the shoulder. But he got through the door and was gone.

Inside the bank, Little Bill had upset the counter. He and Link were crouched down behind it. The room was filled with gunsmoke and the acrid fumes of burnt powder. Chunks of plaster fell every time a slug ploughed into the walls or pinged off the iron door of the vault.

Two of Chilton's men were out of the fight. The cashier and his assistant had taken no part in it. Of the others, not one had escaped unscathed. Blood trickled down into Little Bill's eyes from a ragged gash across his head. His clothes had been almost shot off him, but he had somehow miraculously escaped serious injury. Link had not fared so well. A soft-nosed .45 had torn a great hole through his left lung. His left arm was shattered too, but he had managed to prop his six-guns up against the counter and continue to blaze away.

"Link—I'm goin' to drag this counter toward the door," Bill whipped out. "Do you think you can back up a little? I'll get you out of here in a minute or two."

"You won't get me anywhere," Link muttered. "Give me your guns; I can't reload any more. I'll keep 'em busy until you make the door—" He began to cough again as the blood choked him.

Little Bill glared at him ferociously. "We're goin' out of here together. You get that straight!"

"No we ain't, Bill," Link gasped. "I ain't goin' nowhere. This is keno for me—"

Little Bill knew it was the truth, but he made no move to go. His guns spurted flame again. He heard the engine whistle and knew the train was moving out of Laguna.

Link heard it too. He slumped over against Bill's leg. "Bill—get goin'," he whispered. "Just look into this for me if you make it—"

"Link—"

There wasn't any answer. Outside he could hear Yuma and Cactus Jack's guns barking. Flash Chaney's lifeless body lay huddled on the sidewalk. Of Crescent he could see nothing. But he understood why. "Believe me I'll look into this if we make it!" he promised.

He leaped through the door and reached Cactus.

"Where's the rifles?" he demanded.

"They ain't in the wagon!" Cactus exclaimed. "Crescent—"

"Yeah, come on! Run for it!"

Curly saw them coming. He was hugging the side of the building with the horses. He pulled them down as Little

Bill and Cactus ran up. Cactus had hard work getting his leg up. Blood was oozing out of his boot.

Yuma came then. He sailed through the air into his saddle. Bent low, they headed for the depot. The train was moving out. The snipers who were firing from the roof of the hardware store had to hold their fire for fear of hitting the crowd on the platform.

"Give 'em the spurs," Little Bill cried as they circled around the rear end of the moving train. "We got to ride now!"

The passengers and crew were leaning out of the windows watching them Just outside of town the tracks curved sharply to the south. The train began to gather speed. In a few minutes it left them behind. But they were a mile from town now.

They knew a posse would be after them presently. The telegraph would flash a warning ahead of them. In less than an hour, sheriffs and peace officers all the way to the Oklahoma line would be riding on their trail. It left them a fighting chance, and they had to be satisfied with it.

Little Bill forced his horse up beside Curly. "You all right?" he asked.

"Yeh—not a scratch!" His voice sounded hollow and tired. "Link and Flash —they got 'em, eh?"

Bill nodded. "Crescent—Link was right about that skunk! Sold us out."

"I'll square that some day if nobody else does," Cactus muttered grimly.

"It'll be attended to," Little Bill assured him. "You think you can make it with that leg? We can't stop."

"I'll make it, all right."

They left the railroad in the course of two miles and began to head west. In that direction they could escape the telegraph.

Hours later, they pulled up at a little creek and wasted precious minutes bandaging their wounds.

"If we can give 'em the slip until night falls, we'll make it," Bill told them. We'll help ourselves to fresh horses, first chance we get."

By midnight, dog weary, they circled around the last Kansas town and headed for the line. Daybreak found them back in the wild, lawless Cherokee Strip where only the hardiest of U. S. marshals dared to venture.

CHAPTER III

SAFELY back in their old hide-out in the Strip, they could take stock of themselves. Save for Curly, all needed attention. Little Bill turned surgeon and soon had his men and himself patched up.

"In a week or ten days we'll be as good as ever," he laughed.

"Mighty lucky for us you didn't say nothin' about the train 'until just before we rode into town," said Yuma. "If Crescent had known about that in time to have tipped the marshal off we would have been mowed down right there."

Little Bill cursed the traitor. 'I should have listened to Link. Funny how he knew—"

"It was just a hunch he had," Cactus brooded. "I had it too, but I didn't pay any attention to it. How do you suppose he got rid of the rifles, Bill?"

"He must have tossed them out just before he turned off the ranch road. It was the only place he was out of our sight for a minute." His wrath began to run away with him and he got to his feet and paced furiously back and forth the length of the sod shanty. "The dirty, lowdown snake!" he raged. "You hear me, boys, I'll fetch him for this if it's the last thing I do on earth! He perhaps got a nice piece of money for this. It'll take him out of the country; but he'll be back as soon as he's broke. I'll be waitin' for him."

"So will the rest of us," Yuma promised

That evening Little Bill and Curly sat outside the shanty. The others had turned in.

"Curly—you know what I've got on my mind," Little Bill murmured at last.

"I reckon I do," Curly admitted soberly.

"It ain't easy to say, but I got to do it: you've got to go, Curly. You know now what happens to outlaws—Link and Flash gone; the rest of us shot up; and not a cent to show for it. I hope the lesson won't be wasted on you."

"I'll never forget what happened yesterday," Curly answered without looking up. "A lot of things ran through my head as I waited for you to come out."

"Yeh? For instance?"

"That crack you made about how easy you got your money. You're just an old liar, Bill."

"You're right. There ain't no such thing as easy money when you've got to put a six-gun in your fist to get it." He gave Curly a searching glance. "If you had things like that runnin' through your head this fracas wasn't all for nothin' at that. Mebbe you're beginnin' to agree with me that you ought to be movin' along."

Curly did not answer at once. "Bill—why can't the two of us be movin' along?" he queried at last.

"What? With all the grudges the law has got ag'in me?" Little Bill shook his head solemnly. "It's too late, Curly—too late. Don't think even you won't have trouble makin' it. A hundred people saw you yesterday; the law will be waitin' to trip you.

"You'll have to get this thing out of your mind and tell yourself it never happened. I don't care how straight you go, if folks ever get wind that you took part in an attempted bank robbery they won't overlook it. They'll make an outlaw out of you; and I know you ain't one—I'd hoped to be able to give you a little stake; but I've got only a few dollars in my belt. You're welcome to that."

"I don't want it, Bill. When I pull out of here I'm goin' on my own."

"I'd like to kinda know where you are, but it'll be better if I don't. You just put a lot of distance between yourself and this country."

There was little that remained to be said. Both realized this was good-bye.

"I see you brought your little dun in this evenin'," Bill got out at last, his eyes fixed on the grazing pony.

"Yeh, she's fat and sassy. Ought to take me a long ways—"

"You ain't goin' tonight?" It was only Bill's way of saying he knew it to be the case.

"Yeh—I just been waitin' for the moon to show. Reckon I can throw my saddle on now."

Little Bill bent down and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. He made it an important operation this evening. "Be a nice night," he muttered without looking up.

Eyes veiled, he watched Curly saddle up beyond the fire.

"Wish I was goin' with him," he mused. "Funny, after all these years, me hankerin' for a new country. Shucks, I'm just an old fool. I hope he don't ask me to shake hands."

The identical thought was troubling Curly. To escape from it, he vaulted into his saddle. The little dun reared. It was very opportune.

"So long, Bill!" he called, his voice sticking in his throat.

"So long!" Little Bill answered. "Luck to you."

He got to his feet and stared after him. Curly did not look back. Ten hours or more to the west was the New Mexico line. That was their objective point for the present.

Later, by skirting the Raton Range, he meant to move north into Colorado.

He rode in the open when he could, and not only because the going was easier. The Strip was not a country to be traveled by night with impunity unless one gave warning of his coming.

Several times he knew horsemen watched him from a distance.

Breakfast time came, but without any sign of breakfast. In fact noon passed and evening was well on the way before he caught sight of a shanty.

As he rode up, a man came to the door and eyed him suspiciously. Curly felt his sharp scrutiny.

There was something familiar about the man, and when Curly saw the light yellow wagon under the lean-to that had been built onto the shanty, he knew the man in the doorway was Windy Ben. Ben was really a fence for the roving outlaw bands who had their headquarters in the Strip, but he pretended to be just a poor peddler of such odds and ends as men living in the open need from time to time.

"Well, Ben," Curly called out, "any

chance of puttin' my feet under your table?"

The old man's hawk-like face remained as bleak as ever. "Vell, young fellah, you got my name, all right; but I don't know you."

"No, but you know some friends of mine," Curly remarked pointedly. "You sold this check shirt and neckerchief I'm wearin' to a certain party about ten days back, didn't you?"

It was identification enough. Old Ben knew immediately that Little Bill was the friend to whom Curly referred. "Vell," he said, "come in. A meal you're always velcome to."

The old man had evidently been preparing his own supper. As he busied himself at the stove he kept up a running fire of conversation. Most of his talk was veiled, but Curly understood him perfectly and replied in kind.

"Vell, draw up a chair and eat," Ben invited finally.

The food was good and Curly did justice to it.

"I see you're headin' vest," the old man volunteered as Curly prepared to leave. "The La Junta Trail is being watched—both vays. Deputy U. S. marshals—looking for outlaws. If anybody vanted to give 'em the slip he could follow the first creek into the hills and come out beyond Raton Peak."

"Yeah, I reckon he could do that," Curly nodded. "If he wanted to—"

"Sure! Just follow the north fork and stay on the ridge." He stepped out with Curly. "You ever know a fellow by the name of Crescent Campeau?" The question came without warning. Curly did not bother to answer until he was in the saddle once more.

"Seems I heard of him," he said without apparent interest.

"I could tell some friends of yours vere to look for him."

"I reckon they might be interested," Curly murmured tonelessly.

Long after he had left the shanty behind, he continued to ask himself if old Ben really knew anything about Crescent. "Reckon not," he decided. "Crescent is a lone wolf from now on, and that kind is mighty hard to find."

Ten days from the time he had waved farewell to Little Bill, he stood looking down on the country spread out to the east of the Big Horns in Wyoming. It was a cowman's paradise.

A thin line of willows told him where to look for water. It was Crazy Woman Creek. He followed it through the hills. Cattle grazed on the green flats. He did not have to see the white-faced bulls running with them to know they were graded stock.

"Well, Quita," he said to the little dun, "maybe we'll catch on with this outfit. We're sure goin' to speak to the old man."

He had not gone more than half a mile before he saw a rider ford the creek below him. To his surprise the stranger raised a hand in a friendly hail. He pulled the dun into a lope and quickly jogged up to where the other waited.

Curly's eyebrows arched into startled question marks as he saw that it was a girl who confronted him. She seemed equally surprised.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I thought you were one of the men." There was something in the deep timbre of her voice that thrilled him. Her blue eyes were frank and smiling.

"I reckon you're speakin' of the Forty Bar, ma'am," he ventured.

"You *are* a stranger in these parts," she countered, with a little laugh. "We're the only outfit on Crazy Woman, this side of Buffalo Crossing. The brand on your dun pony is a strange one to me. Where are you from, cowboy?"

The question brought Curly out of an absorbed contemplation of the golden glints the sun was striking in her hair. "Arizona," he answered. He had long since decided that should be his story.

"As far as that, eh?"

"Yeh," he nodded, anxious to turn the subject into safer channels. "Been some time since I spread my loop; but I hope to catch on somewheres in this Big Horn country. I don't suppose you'd know whether the Forty Bar was takin' on anybody or not?"

In prospect, the job of riding for that as yet unknown outfit had become utterly desirable to Curly.

"I suppose I would," the girl answered, eyes twinkling. She was well aware of his confusion. Something about Curly burned into her too; but being twenty and thoroughly capable of taking care of herself, she was in no danger of permitting him to suspect it. "The Forty Bar hasn't taken anyone on in months." She saw Curly's face fall. "But don't let that stop you from asking," she continued. "The Fall work is just a few weeks away. You'll see the house if you just keep to the creek."

"Might I trouble you to tell me the foreman's name?" Curly asked.

"Father is his own foreman. Corson is the name—Thad Corson," she called back.

Curly watched her until a bend in the creek hid her from view and then headed down the stream. He found himself whistling merrily as he came in sight of the Forty Bar house.

Half a dozen men were gathered about a pole corral beyond the house. As he rode up he quickly decided that the tall man, with the flowing white mustache, standing on the corral gate and watching with absorbed interest the performance going on in the corral, was Thad Corson. The surmise was correct.

The owner of the Forty Bar and his men turned their heads momentarily to give him a perfunctory nod of welcome. It was only a stolen glance, for inside the corral a man was attempting to ride a big black stallion, and having trouble too.

Curly drew up across the corral from them and was immediately as interested as they. The big black was covered with foam, and squealing and snorting with rage. It would crow hop across the corral, spin on its hind legs and come back, head down, and bucking and twisting from its nose to the tip of its tail.

"This old boy is in earnest," Curly said to himself. "I don't know who this hombre is who's tryin' to fan him, but he's got a lot to learn about fightin' broncs. You can't get anywhere by clubbin' 'em when they get that way."

Every few seconds the black would try to brush its rider off against the corral. Failing in that, it would charge at the opposite side, come down stiff-legged and trembling in a dizzy stop.

"Look out for him, Stony!" someone cried. "He'll get you at that!"

Stony doubled his fist and hit the black a resounding crack on the side of the head. He was a three-quarters Piegan Indian, and as enraged now as the horse he was trying to ride, for he had been thrown twice already, and he had some reputation around Buffalo Crossing as a bronc fighter.

"He better call it a day," Curly thought as the stallion backed off for another rush at the fence. "That black will pile up so sudden one of these times that he'll get rid of everythin' that ain't nailed down on him. If he ever gets that breed in the dust he'll sure stamp the life out of him."

It happened sooner than Curly figured. The powerful stallion stopped as short as though he had pulled up at the end of a trace chain. Stony Pierce went sailing through air to bring up with a dull thud against the corral posts.

He lay still. There was no way of telling whether he was badly hurt or not. It had happened so quickly that, across the corral, Corson and his men sat helpless as the black reared to come down stiff-legged on his late tormentor.

Curly saw what was about to happen. His lips pursed and a shrill, quavering whistle, with a weird plaint at the end of it, pierced the air. The big black's ears went up and its nostrils quivered nervously. Curly repeated the call. To the amazement of the men who had started to climb the gate, the stallion backed away.

"Keep your men back!" Curly called out.

The black had its eyes on him now. He began to talk to it; a curious chant. It held the animal spellbound as Curly vaulted over the corral fence. With marked deliberation he walked up to the horse.

The stallion was trembling and snorting excitedly. Curly's lips pursed again, but the shrillness had gone from his cry. It was soft, pleading now. The black did not rear as he put out a hand and ran it over its

muzzle. Unhurried, he reached for the dangling reins and led the animal across the corral.

"Get that man out of here now," he said without raising his voice. As two of the Forty Bar men carried Stony out of the corral, Curly pulled the saddle from the black. The bridle followed next. He backed away then and made for the gate.

"Man, I don't know how you did it," Corson exclaimed as Curly climbed down from the gate. "I heard the Navajos have a trick like that; but I never believed it."

"Seein' is believin' sometimes," Curly grinned. "I didn't learn that cry from a Navvy, but it's their horse cry. That man get hurt?"

"No, just knocked out. That black has banged us all up. I had Stony come out to see what he could do with him. Plain to me the only thing to do is to shoot the critter."

"That horse can be ridden," Curly declared.

"Well, he's yours if you can ride him."

"I don't know as I want him," Curly answered with a laugh. "I would like to have a job though."

"So that's the trick of it, eh?" Corson grinned. "Kind of a case of handin' out a free sample of your goods before you try to make the sale. What's your name?"

"Curly Johnson—"

"Curly Johnson, eh?" He turned to one of his men. "Trace, you show this boy where to put his roll; he's ridin' for us."

CHAPTER IV

THE Forty Bar wagon was moving toward home. Seven men were with it. Curly was one of them. For three weeks they had been working the Badlands to the east, branding calves and putting their stuff back on its own range.

Nine months had passed since Curly had come to the Big Horn country. Jogging toward home this morning, the air pleasantly warm and the blue skies cloudless and sparkling, he found it hard to believe.

"Don't seem as though time could have passed that quick," he mused. It seems it was the other day I said good-bye to Little Bill."

He had done well for himself with the Forty Bar. He had proven his worth on innumerable occasions. That Spring he had been made straw boss, with a foreman's wages. And he had saved his money; something he had never done before coming to Wyoming.

It was indicative of the change in him; a change so great that it was reflected in his face. And it was not due solely to his work. There was always Julia Corson, proud, beautiful and unattainable—or so he often told himself.

He had heard nothing of or from Little Bill. The unhappy affair at Laguna had almost passed from his mind.

It was noon before they came in sight of the house. Curly went on ahead. As he rode into the yard he noticed a strange horse standing at the hitch-rack outside the room Thad used as an office.

"Company," he said to himself, looking about for a glimpse of Julia. She was not to be seen, but as he got down from his saddle, Corson and his visitor stepped out. The stranger's face was turned away, but Curly's mouth went hard. He did not have to see the man's face to know he was Crescent Campeau.

It was Crescent, sure enough. He turned the next instant and found Curly's eyes boring into his. He pulled down the corners of his mouth in his surprise, but not an eyelid fluttered in his bronze mask.

Corson greeted Curly and then turned to Crescent. "This is Curly Johnson, my straw boss," he explained. Then to Curly, "Poe, here, has just bought the old Lazy K place over on Pole Creek. Goin' to be neighbors of ours."

"Yeh?" Curly queried, his eyes cold. "I'm certainly glad to know you, Mr. Poe."

"You can forget the mister," Crescent answered with a show of good will. "Drop in sometime; I'd like to have a talk with you."

"I'll do that —sometime," Curly answered.

Crescent mounted with a flourish and rode away.

"I feel sorry for him," Thad declared. "He hasn't any water to speak of on that place and precious little good range. How

he hopes to take a livin' off it is beyond me."

"Maybe he's got some original ideas on how to squeeze out a profit," Curly answered.

"He'll need 'em," said Corson. "I predict he won't be with us long."

"He may not at that," Curly murmured cryptically.

For twenty-four hours he plagued himself with the dire possibilities Crescent's presence held for him. In a twinkling the nine months that had intervened since he had seen him last seemed to have been swept away.

"The sooner this thing gets to a showdown the better it'll be," he decided at last. "This country ain't big enough for both of us."

The afternoon was well along when he rode up to the tumble-down Lazy K house. Two men were building a corral. One of them was Stony Pierce. The other was a Mexican, and a stranger to him.

"You workin' for this outfit?" he asked Stony.

"Yeh. If you looking for the boss you find him in the kitchen."

Curly went on. "Stony and that Mex makes it three of a kind," he thought. "All nice boys."

He found Crescent waiting for him.

"I thought you'd be over," Crescent grinned. "Take a chair. We ought to have a lot to say to each other."

"I can say it standin' up," Curly informed him. "What's your game, Crescent?"

Crescent pretended to be amused by his directness. "You want to get this over in a hurry, eh? Well, I can understand that." The amusement died out of his eyes, leaving them cold and menacing. "If you're smart, you'll get that chip off your shoulder. I ain't goin' to turn you up or run you off this country unless you make me."

Curly understood him perfectly. "So that's the club you're goin' to use," he whipped out. "Once a rat, always a rat, eh? Well, you get this, Crescent—you're not goin' to run anybody out of this country."

"No?" Crescent rolled a cigarette deftly. "Maybe you're mistaken. I been askin' some questions since I met you yesterday. You ain't done bad for yourself at all up here; straw boss for a good outfit and all lined up to wed the old man's daughter."

Curley stiffened to spring at him. Crescent waved him back.

"All right, I won't bring the lady into the conversation again," Campeau sneered. "I was only goin' to say that you don't want certain people around here to know that you used to run with outlaws. I reckon you'll go a long ways to keep them from knowin'. You might even consider pullin' out."

"Not a chance!" Curly ground out fiercely. "I ain't runnin'. You might have me sent back to Kansas—but I don't think you will. You're a tinhorn, Crescent. I always figured you was, long before I knew it for a fact. You're livin' up to it right now. You can crack your whip, but don't fool yourself that you can stampede me. I know how to slow you up. I've got some friends who are powerful anxious to meet up with you—some of your old acquaintances, Mr. Poe."

Crescent jeered, but it seemed forced. "That would do you a lot of good, wouldn't it?" he demanded. "Before they ever got me I'd fix things up pretty for you. I might even fix it up for them—and you could all go back together. But why talk of a pay-off? I told you there won't be any trouble unless you ask for it."

Curly's lips curled with fresh contempt. "You tone seems to have changed in the last few seconds," he jerked out. "You know there ain't room enough here for the two of us."

"Why not? It's a big country. When I found you was here I figured you'd listen to reason. You've got everythin' at stake. You ain't goin' to toss everything away, are yuh? Why, folks that love you now would hate you if they ever—"

His voice trailed off to silence. There was something in the ice-cold depths of Curly's eyes that told him he had gone far enough.

"Crescent— this is the second time I've asked you. What's your game?"

"Game? Humph? What makes you so sure I've got a game?"

"Because you've never made an honest dollar in your life."

"Maybe I've turned over a new leaf. Who knows?" Crescent laughed at his own sorry jest. "I bought this outfit cheap enough. I'm goin' to build it up."

He was lying, and Curly knew it.

"No, that would never appeal to you," he said. "You know you can never take a livin' off it."

"Don't fool yourself," Crescent scoffed. "I may take a mighty good livin' off this ranch."

"With that pair outside to help you, eh?" Curly queried sarcastically. "Listen, what you've got on your mind is no mystery to me, Crescent. I don't know that pock-marked greaser, but Stony Pierce is no stranger. If what folks are sayin' is true, he's workin' for the right outfit now."

"What do you mean by that?" Crescent shot back. "What are they sayin'?"

"That he runs an iron on other people's stock."

"Is that so?" Campeau gasped in mock surprise. "I'll sure have to speak to him."

"And that'll be *your* game," Curly said.

"Yeh?" Crescent snarled venomously. "I'd think it over once or twice before I repeated that remark if I was you. Just remember it will take a lot of provin'."

"Not much. If we begin to lose stuff, I'll know who's doin' the rustlin'."

"Will you?" Crescent's eyes were murderous. "And what will you do about it?"

They glared at each other with deadly intentness for seconds before Curly answered.

"I'll stop you cold—no matter what it costs me."

"Yeh?" Campeau queried with an oily smirk. "That's what you think now. You may change your mind when you've had time to cool off. One of us is bluffin', Curly and it ain't me!"

CHAPTER V

THE Spring work went on. By the first of the following week the Forty Bar had its beef ready for the long drive to the railroad. Curly was to have charge of the trail herd and the shipping, with Corson arriving in time to see the stuff go aboard the cars.

It was a prospect Curly did not relish now, for it meant he must be away from the ranch for at least ten days. But there was nothing he could say.

He came out of Thad's office in the late afternoon to find Julia perched on the porch railing. There was always a fresh, crisp look about her that wind and weather seemed not to affect at all. He would have gone on if he could, pretending not to have seen her. He had been avoiding her studiously for days.

Julia's mouth tensed as she sensed his intention. "Curly—" she called. He turned to face her with evident embarrassment. She made him sit down beside her, after having retreated to the far end of the porch.

"Nice and cool here, ain't it?" he said awkwardly. She continued to gaze at him and made no attempt to answer.

"Curly Johnson—what's come over you?" she demanded earnestly. "I've never seen such a change in a man. I don't mean your staying away from me. There's a haggard, worried look about you that wasn't there when you came back from the Badlands."

"The work, I guess," Curly murmured. "We've really been short-handed—"

"No, it's not the work," Julia insisted. "Work agrees with you, Curly. You've got something on your mind. Have you had words with father?"

"Shucks, no!" Curly replied miserably. "He couldn't treat me better if I was his own son."

"Then what is it?"

"I tell you it ain't nothin', ma'am." And then in a desperate attempt to turn the conversation. "I see you're goin' for a ride. I wish I could be goin' along." He felt safe enough in expressing the desire, since he obviously had so much to do before evening that he could not be spared for thirty minutes. "Where you aimin' to go?"

"I thought I'd cross over to Pole Creek and come back by way of the North Fork."

Curley's eyes clouded. "I don't think you ought to be goin' that far alone."

"And why not?" Julia demanded with

mild surprise. "I've always gone where I wanted—"

"I know. But the country's fillin' up with strangers—"

"Oh, so that's it!" she exclaimed triumphantly. "We seem to be getting somewhere now. The only lately-arrived stranger I know of on Pole Creek is the new owner of the Lazy K. The two or three times he has been here, trying to buy breeders or to transact business of some sort, I've caught you glaring at him. You don't like him at all—do you?"

"I'll say I don't," Curly answered, and his tone was sharper than he intended.

"He's kind of a show-off," she ran on, "but rather interesting I think."

"There's half-a-dozen ways you can ride without goin' over there."

"Now you're not being fair," Julia teased. "Just because you've taken a dislike to the man isn't any reason why I should stay away from Pole Creek. Did you know there was a dance at the schoolhouse tonight? It's the last dance this Spring."

Curly felt he knew where their conversation was headed now. For three days he had tortured himself with the thought that he must not ask her to go to the dance, nor do anything but try to efface himself in her mind until the issue between Crescent and himself was decided one way or another.

"I heard about it," he said; "but we're pullin' out before daylight for the railroad."

"Yes, that's right; you will be busy," Julia said lightly. "You wouldn't be back here before midnight. I thought of that when Mr. Poe invited me—"

The blood drained away from Curly's face. For a moment he couldn't trust himself to speak. "Ma'am, are you goin' to the dance with that man?"

"Well, May Ennis and Bud are driving in. I thought we might ride in with them."

Curly threw discretion to the winds. "I—I figured you'd be goin' with me," he exclaimed.

"But you didn't mention anything about it. You're busy—you just finished saying so."

"I am—but I'll arrange things."

It was exactly what Julia wished. Eminently successful, she mounted her pony and rode away. With murder in his heart, Curly hurried back to the corrals.

Crescent was already present when they arrived at the schoolhouse. It amazed Curly to see how easily the man has established himself on a friendly footing with the community in the short time he had been there. Crescent swaggered up to him at the first opportunity and asked for a dance with Julia.

They were alone for the moment, near the door.

"You skunk, I didn't think you'd have nerve enough to crowd me like that," Curly ground out furiously. "We can have a showdown right here tonight. You're armed and so am I. If I see you so much as tryin' to speak to her you want to fill your hand in a hurry, 'cause I'm comin' after you, and I'll come a smokin'. And you can talk and be damned to you!"

The livid scar on Crescent's cheek that had won him his sobriquet flamed redly. Curly was watching his hand rather than his face. He saw Campeau's knuckles whiten and then slowly relax.

"All right," Crescent muttered viciously, "I'll let you get away with this. But I'll remember it, Curly."

"That's what I want you to do—remember it!"

Crescent kept his distance for the rest of the evening and Curly pretended a gaiety he was far from feeling. As he expected, it was long after midnight when Bud Ennis deposited them at the Forty Bar house. Even so, Julia refused to let him go at once.

Heretofore, he had been to some pains to manage a minute alone with her. Tonight it filled him with fear. She had never seemed so desirable. The impulse to take her in his arms and crush her to him was almost irresistible.

Curly had but to gaze at her to realize what he stood to lose. A word from him tonight and she was his. He knew it—as little as he knew about women. And yet, he found courage to steel himself and turn away.

"I see Bozie is wranglin' the horses al-

ready," he said, his throat tight. "Light in the cookhouse, too. Reckon we'll be movin' pretty soon—"

He waited for Julia to speak, but she had nothing to say.

"I'd like to fetch you somethin' from town—if there's anythin' you'd like—"

"No, never mind," she murmured, holding her voice steady with an effort. She opened the door. "Just have a—good trip, Curly."

By the time he had folded away his finery and buckled on his chaps the bunkhouse was awake. A few minutes later the cook rang the bell for breakfast. Curly singled out Reb Powner.

"Reb, I don't want to borrow trouble for you, but you're goin' to be in charge after the old man leaves day after tomorrow, and you're mighty apt to have a good-sized dish of it put in your way."

Reb cocked his head and glanced at him sharply. He was an old-timer and had been drawing wages from the Forty Bar for many years. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, just keep your eye on our stuff and let things take care of themselves here at home."

"There ain't no misunderstandin' that," Reb declared thoughtfully. "I reckon there's a certain outfit that'll bear watchin' at that."

"That's what I want you to do," Curly ordered. "You strap your guns on when you go out, and you have young Bozie ride with you."

Breakfast was dispatched hurriedly. In the ghostly half-light just before dawn the corrals were emptied and the beef herd put in motion. Corson came out to see them on their way.

"First time since I started the brand that I haven't led the drive myself," he told Curly. "I sorta feel like a duck out of water this mornin'. You better ride along before I have a pony saddled and take after you."

Curly glanced at Julia's window as he rode past the house. There was no sign of her. Just before he forded the creek he looked back again. It was almost the exact spot from which he had first seen the Forty Bar.

"If I was a man I'd let that be my last look at the ranch," he brooded bitterly. "It would keep me out of jail and keep her from ever knowin' what an ornery coyote I am—lettin' her care for me with what I had hanging over my head."

CHAPTER VI

FOR a week Reb and Bozie roamed the hills without finding anything to justify Curly's warning. Several times they watched the Lazy K from the high bluffs above Pole Creek without seeing anything to arouse suspicion.

They were there again today. Just before noon they saw Crescent and his two men ride away. They waited an hour and then came down and had a good look at the cattle penned up in the corrals and grazing along the creek.

Every single cow and steer wore a vented brand.

"But that's as it should be," Reb had to admit. "They bought everythin' they've got. There's one of the breeders they got from us." He pointed to a two-year-old that bore a vented Forty Bar and a freshly-burned Lazy K brand.

"It looks honest," young Bozie agreed, "but you tell me how you're agoin' to know if them steers was bought or rustled. You couldn't tell unless you checked up every head of stock they got."

"Don't be so hasty," Reb scowled at him reprovingly. "Who said anythin' about rustlin'? We're just curious, that's all!"

On Sunday morning, Crescent came to the Forty Bar. He asked for Corson. Julia talked to him.

"Father isn't back yet," she said. Despite her telling Curly that she found Crescent interesting, something about the man aroused her distrust.

"Well, no harm done," he answered. "I'll come back tomorrow."

"But I hardly think he'll be here before Tuesday. Better wait until then."

That was the information Campeau wanted.

"Gettin' things fixed up over my way," he volunteered, giving her an appraising glance. "Before long we'll have a house-

warmin' and an old-fashioned barbecue. You can consider this an invitation, Miss Corson. I sure want you to come. Just feel at liberty to drop in any time you're goin' by. I'm always glad to see my neighbors."

Julia thanked him and he rode away.

On Tuesday, she was preparing to ride into Buffalo Crossing for the mail when young Bozie dashed across the yard. He had been east of the creek for a few miles.

"They're comin', Miss Corson," he exclaimed. "They're well this side of the Powder. They ought to be in in less than an hour."

Julia returned to the house to wait for them. Half an hour later she caught the sharp tattoo of hoofs and came to the door, thinking it was her father or Curly. She was surprised to see that it was Sam Ennis, Bud's father, and Steve Taylor from the North Fork. Both owned big outfits.

They had nothing to say, other than that they'd wait for her father to arrive; but Julia sensed excitement in the air. Thad was surprised to find the two men waiting for him. He greeted Julia fondly and then led Sam and Steve into his office.

Curly did not come up to the house. From across the yard he had caught a glimpse of the two men. Instantly he surmised what brought them there. He knew Steve Taylor was not in the habit of riding thirty miles just to pass the time of day. He called Reb aside and plied him with questions.

"Then you really didn't see anythin' that looked queer?"

"Not a thing, Curly! They got about three hundred head of stock over there; but that ain't no more than they should have, accordin' to reports of what they been buyin'."

"That's a fact," Curly had to admit. "I don't suppose you got out into the Badlands very far."

"No, I didn't. Some of our stuff may have drifted back that-a-way, but not much. The water-holes are beginnin' to dry up. That country is just plain desert after the first of June."

They were still talking when Curly was summoned to the office.

Ennis and Taylor nodded a greeting.

"Curly, we appear to have got back none too soon," Thad announced gravely.

"Yeh? What seems to be the trouble?"

"I'll tell you, and in one word," Taylor exclaimed. "Rustlers! They got into my stuff sometime yesterday and cut out not less than fifty head!"

"And I got about the same dose," Ennis informed him. "Be mighty strange if they missed you folks."

Curly's mouth hardened. They were only confirming what he had feared, and he could not even pretend to be surprised. Crescent was hurling his defy in his teeth as he had promised.

"You take this pretty calm," Thad rebuked him sharply. "It'll be serious enough if we find they been in among our stuff."

"Reckon I appreciate all that," Curly assured him. "If I don't seem surprised, maybe it's because I've been all set for this for days."

Corson brought his chair down on all fours with a bang. Taylor and Ennis were no less startled.

"If you know somethin', I'd like to hear it," Thad exclaimed, measuring Curly with his eyes. "Or was it just a hunch?"

"It could be a hunch or just common sense — dependin' on how you look at it. When you call a man a rustler you've got to have the facts or be ready to take the consequences. I'm willin' to take that chance," Curly drove on, realizing he was pulling the props out from under his feet. "When a man buys a worthless ranch, without good grass or water, and then pretends to stock it with a handful of stuff picked up here and there from every outfit in forty miles of himself, so that he's got the greatest assortment of vented brands runnin' loose on one range that a body ever saw—what are you goin' to call it if you suspect he's got a trick up his sleeve?"

"I'd call it damn good sense!" Thad whipped out. He hit his desk a resounding blow with his fist. "It's as plain as the nose on your face! Why didn't you say somethin' about this, Curly?"

"Well, there ain't no such thing as rustlin' until stock begins to disappear. I had

Reb out ridin' the hills while we were away. Our stuff seems to be all right."

"Wait till you start lookin' for it out in the Badlands," Ennis muttered gloomily. "You won't find it!"

"Well, if that's the case, I'll know where to look for the gent that took 'em," Thad thundered.

"I don't know that you will," Taylor said. "I had that idea too. About this fellow Poe, I mean. Some of my boys laid out in the Badlands last night at Crow Butte. They jumped three men just after daylight. Tough lookin' hombres. They chased 'em for an hour before they lost 'em. They were all strangers. Poe wasn't one of them, nor was Stony Pierce."

Thad didn't know what to say. Curly was equally dumfounded. He wondered if Crescent had a gang behind him of whom he knew nothing.

"You're sure your boys didn't make a mistake?" Thad asked.

"Positively no!" Taylor answered. "I'm convinced Poe hasn't anythin' to do with this. These rustlers are movin' in on us from across the Badlands. That's the way they'll run the stuff out too. In that broken country they can hide out mighty easy."

"What I'd like to know is what we propose doin' about it," Ennis spoke up. Taylor answered him.

"The thing to do is say nothin' and start out to comb that country. We won't bring the law into this. We'll round up these gents and string 'em up. That's the only way to stamp out rustlin'."

They were in accord on that. They discussed their plans for an hour. Curly had little to say. He could not reconcile himself to the fact that Crescent was not the rustler.

"As far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter now whether I'm right or wrong," he told himself. "He'll be sure to hear that I came out against him, and he'll be after me—unless he figures he's doin' so well he can afford to wait."

With rustlers to worry about he had a valid excuse for seeing little or nothing of Julia. Heavily armed, Corson, Reb and he combed the Badlands, checking their stuff. On the second day Curly found the ashes of a fire. They were cold, but they were not old.

"Somebody heated an iron here," he declared. "Too small for a campfire."

"I moved quite a little bunch of stuff out of here last month. You can see that some of 'em came back."

"Not a critter in sight today," Reb pointed out.

"No, they raided us," Corson ground out. "Can't be any doubt of it."

They went as far as the Powder without catching sight of a soul. On the way back they headed northwest, so as to come out beyond Pole Creek. They were well out of the Badlands when they saw two riders waiting for them. It proved to be Sam Ennis and Bud. They had been out for two days without seeing anything of the rustlers.

"Ran into Taylor and his men yesterday," Sam told them. "They had an Injun tracker with 'em. He picked up the trail of those three hombres, but it led him into the lava beds, and that was that."

They rode on together for a few miles.

"By the way, Curly," Sam remarked, "that certain party that you thought might be the man we're lookin' for was seen in Buffalo Crossin' about two hours after Taylor's boys jumped those fellows out here. He couldn't have made it in that time."

"Reckon not," Curly agreed.

They left Ennis and his son and turned up Pole Creek. It was a steady climb. Curly pulled up his pony when Corson would have turned off for the Forty Bar.

"I'm goin' to go up the creek a ways," he said.

"You can if you want to," Thad agreed, "but I think the sooner you forget that idea the quicker we'll get somewhere."

"Well, it won't take me out of my way much," Curly answered philosophically.

He found no one at the Lazy K house. A glance inside revealed nothing of interest. In the corral there was not over a half-a-dozen steers. The new brands were healed. That was true of the stuff he saw along the creek.

"I'd have to give him a clean bill of health on what I see here," he confessed.

"Course there's nothin' to keep him from havin' a hidden corral in the Badlands."

He began to climb the bluffs presently. He had just reached the top when Crescent rode out of a little stand of aspens. Campeau carried a rifle across his saddle bow.

They rode up to each other, eyes wary.

"Been payin' me a visit, eh?" Crescent laughed. "I hope you had a good look. Nothin' down here I'm afraid to have anybody see."

"Then you've heard the news?"

"Yeh, I get around a little. I also heard that you suspected me."

"I did, and I still do," Curly assured him. It seemed to amuse rather than infuriate Crescent.

"It turned out to be quite a favor to me," he taunted, "judgin' by what Steve Taylor and a few others are sayin'."

"You'll trip up yet, Crescent—"

"It won't be your fault if I do," Campeau shot back, his jaws clicking together. "You were damn careful about what you said. You didn't tell anybody we were old friends—"

"I'm ready to tell 'em!" Curly blazed.

"That's a bluff—and I'll call it right now," said Crescent. "You'd like to get rid of me, but you ain't throwin' away what you got at stake. I been takin' a lot from you. Now I'm tellin' you where to head in. Don't start movin' all your stuff back into the hills. If Corson suggests it, you talk him out of it!"

Curly could only stare at him aghast for a moment. "On the level, Crescent, do you think you can pull that on me? Why don't you stick one of your crooked irons in my hand and ask me to ride with you?"

"Think it over," Crescent commanded. "It won't seem so funny—"

"Not for a second!" Curly rasped. "I'll see you in hell first, Campeau."

CHAPTER VII

THE Forty Bar was in the saddle eighteen to twenty hours a day now. But the rustling continued. Neither eight men nor eighty could have properly defended Corson's unfenced line.

Reb rode with Curly. Several times they stumbled on the fresh tracks of three shod horses.

"They may be holed up around here," Curly said to Reb, "but I doubt it."

"Well, where do you figger they are?"

"Maybe among the buttes to the south."

Reb shook his head. "No water there, and they can't get along without it."

"I wonder about there bein' no water there. What was that tale you told me once about Ghost Springs? Were you just gassin'?"

"No, sir!" Reb exclaimed with a positive shaking of his head. "I never seen it, but I know men who have. Just a big hole dug out of the plateau. You can't see a tree or a rimrock until you're right on it."

"Do you know how to get there?"

Reb scratched his head as he reflected. "No, I can't say I do," he declared thoughtfully. "I know it ain't far east of the sand hills."

"Well, it ain't much to go on," Curly mused, "but I reckon I can find it if it's there."

"You mean you're goin' alone?"

"Yeh. You lay out around here until tomorrow this time, Reb. If I don't show up by then, you go on in to the ranch."

Hours passed before Curly saw the bald, treeless buttes looming up on the horizon. He was riding the little dun. She was surefooted, but the broken lava made the going slow.

Even in among the buttes the ground was flinty. A regiment of cavalry could have ridden over it without leaving sign of its passing. That was also true after he reached the sand hills. The white diamond sand was so dry and free-running that it filled Quita's tracks as soon as the mare stepped out of them.

"East of the sand hills," Curly murmured, recalling Reb's directions. "That might be most anywhere now. This sand has drifted up into hills as far as you can see."

He got through them and continued on east for two miles. Turning then, he headed southward, paralleling the hills. He had to trust to luck now.

Ghost Springs proved to be as ephemeral as its name. By evening he had traced a pattern miles long, back and forth across that desolate land, without finding the slightest sign of a spring.

He picketed the dun.

"I can t give you a drink, old-timer," he murmured, pouring water from his canteen into his hat, "but I'll let you wet your mouth. If we don't find what we're lookin' for an hour or so after the sun comes up we'll pull out of here."

He spread his blanket and pulled off his boots. Night came on but he did not risk a fire. The sombreness of the barren wasteland touched him, and he found it hard to escape his thoughts. But he was weary. By the time the moon came up, he was asleep.

He was astir at dawn. In all the vast sweep of country about him nothing moved.

"Guess we had this hotel to ourselves last night, Quita," he said to the dun. "We'll saddle up now and be movin'."

He had covered several miles and had about given up hope when he was pulled up short by a fissure in the earth that yawned almost at his feet. It was only a crack in the earth's surface where he stood, but off to his right it began to widen until it formed a box canyon half a mile wide. How far to the east it extended he could not tell.

"Must be water down there," he concluded, "judging by the willows."

He was looking down on the tops of them. "If ever there was a hideout made to order this is it."

From the rimrocks he reconnoitered the canyon for the better part of an hour before he tried to find a way into it. When at last he discovered a narrow defile that led down to the springs he moved cautiously, the willows affording perfect cover for a lurking foe.

His fears proved groundless. The springs were flowing, and he and his dun drank their fill. Fresh tracks of horses and cattle in the soft ground told their own story. Just above the springs he found a cleverly concealed brush corral. There was sign enough there to convince him it had been used within two or three days. In a clump of buck brush he found a gunny sack that contained a cooking outfit.

"Sure means they're comin' back," he thought. "Be mighty strange if they haven't cached their irons here somewhere."

He walked around the corral fence, poking under the brush with his foot. His boot touched something that gave out a metallic ring. It was a pair of Lazy K branding irons.

"Ghost Springs," he mused thoughtfully, "won't be hard to find when this business is over."

He replaced the irons and erased all signs of his having been there. He was anxious to get away. Leaving the springs, he went on to the east, intent on learning if the hidden canyon had more than one entrance. He found that it had; the walls pinching together in the course of a mile so that he could reach out and touch them with his hands. As they closed in, fallen rock, sand and earth choked the crevasse and formed a trail that led up to the level of the plateau. He could see it had been used.

"Reckon this is the way they come and go," he decided. "Crescent undoubtedly stumbled on this place just as I did—may be long before he showed up in Buffalo Crossing."

He took his bearings and rode away. He had hours in which to determine exactly what he wanted to do before reaching the ranch. His course was plain enough.

"I told Crescent I'd stop him, and there ain't no goin' back on that," he told himself. "We'll have our little showdown at Ghost Springs. Ridin' into Laguna to stick up a bank wasn't the only mistake I made. I figured I could rub out the outlaw brand on me by playin' square and makin' folks respect me. It doesn't work out that way."

He found Corson and the men moving the Forty Bar cattle out of the Badlands. He called Thad aside and told him what he had discovered.

"You better leave this stuff here for a bait," he suggested. "Make it easy for 'em to rustle it. I'll get some grub and go back to Ghost Springs. You can get word to Taylor and Ennis and whoever you like. For the present, I'd be mighty

careful not to let the boys know anythin' about this."

"Why, you don't think I'm lettin' you go back there alone, do you?" Thad asked. "You wait for us; we'll go to Ghost Springs together."

"That would be a mistake," Curly argued. "I've got my play pretty well figured out. One man can get in there and hide out without makin' them suspicious. Half a dozen of us would tip our play off. We want 'em red-handed."

"I don't want you to take no unnecessary chances, Curly. Just what do you propose doin'?"

"Why, I aim to be back there before midnight. I'll get into the canyon and hide out near the springs. It'll be just a case of waitin' then until they show up. You and the others can lay out in the sand hills. When I want you I'll send you a smoke signal."

Corson shook his head. "How do you know you can get the drop on them? Three to one ain't no fair odds. They'll be armed, and they'll shoot to kill. The skunks will have everythin' to win and nothin' to lose." He paused and fumbled for words. "I've never said nothin', but you've come to be like one of the family to Julia and me. If anythin' went wrong I never could face her."

Curly swallowed hard. So much was destined to go wrong that he could only close his mind to it and go on now.

"Don't worry about me," he muttered. I'll make it, all right."

CHAPTER VIII

FROM where he lay concealed Curly could command a view up and down the canyon. He had left his pony in the hills and trudged into Ghost Springs on foot.

"If they're comin' this mornin', they'll show up soon after dawn," he said to himself as he saw the stars begin to pale before the rising sun.

He nodded off once, only to jerk awake, thinking he heard them coming. Off to his right a piece of brush snapped. He listened intently and heard the sound again once or twice. But minutes passed and he heard nothing more.

"Must have been a coyote comin' in for water," he decided, nerves taut. "Scented me and changed his mind."

Dawn marched up out of the east.

Curly was aware of a strange beating in his ears. It became sharper. Suddenly he realized it was the thudding of hoofs. A moment or two, and he heard cattle bawling

He heard the madly-driven steers pour down the defile to the east. They raised a din that echoed against the canyon walls. Above it he heard the shrill cries of men. Suddenly a horseman flashed into view. It was Stony Pierce, riding ahead to turn the cattle into the corral.

There were at least forty yearlings in the bunch. Curly saw they were all Forty Bar stock. He found some grim satisfaction in that. "Crescent evidently figures I did just what he told me to," he thought.

Campeau and Tampico, the Mexican, appeared through dust, fanning the last of the stragglers ahead of them. In a few minutes they had the bunch corralled.

"Well," Crescent sighed with the satisfaction of seeing a job well done, "there they are. Reckon we can thank Curly Johnson for that bunch."

The smirk on his face, his insufferable insolence, whipped Curly's fury into a searing flame. The three men were not over eighteen feet away. All were easy targets. His fingers tensed with the temptation to cut down on them and close their mouths forever. For excuse, he would only have to say they had jumped him. Thad and the others would only thank him for it.

The impulse passed however. Without his knowing it, Curly subscribed to a code —often as foolish as it was magnanimous —that a man could not be shot down without giving him a warning.

"We better rustle up a little grub now," Crescent said. He turned so that he faced Curly and took a step toward him, all unsuspecting of what the next moment was to bring.

"Stick 'em up! I'll bust the first man that moves."

Crescent's right foot was lifted. He

brought it down as though he suddenly found himself standing on eggs. Stony and the Mexican froze in their tracks.

"Come on, up with 'em!" Curly commanded.

Crescent could not locate him, but he recognized the voice. He flicked a glance right and left, looking for a way out. Tampico and Stony had their hands in the air. Slowly Campeau raised his arms.

"All right," Curly rasped. "Now turn around!" He crawled out of the willows and disarmed them. "The three of you line up," he ordered. "If you've got any idea you're goin' places you better get it out of your heads. It'll be just like stringin' fish if I have to open up on you."

Crescent had found his tongue. "You damn fool!" he cried. "What is this four-flush anyhow?"

"I don't want any chatter from you," Curly droned. "Just button your lip, Crescent!"

"You'll hear it whether you want to or not," Campeau raged. "You can't wash me up that easy. You can turn us over to the sheriff, if that's your idea, but I'll take you out of the arms of that Corson kid. She'll have to get her lovin' somewhere else—"

It was more than Curly could stand. His left flashed out with every ounce of strength he had behind it. It caught Crescent flush on the mouth. The big fellow's head went back as though a mule had kicked him. Down he went then, blood trickling from his lips, to stretch his length on the ground.

He lay there for a moment without moving. Curly touched him with his boot.

"Get up!" he ground out. "You ain't hurt."

Crescent had fallen beside his horse. He clutched the pony's fore leg as he started to drag himself to his feet. His hand settled on his saddle horn then, and he slowly straightened up. He had a six-gun in his saddle-bag. Apparently groping blindly, his fingers stole to it.

Tampico and Stony knew the gun was there. Their bodies tensed as they waited.

Crescent shook his head, as if to clear it, and leaned against his saddle. As though on springs, he whirled then, gun in hand, and fired without taking aim. The bullet burned a red trail across Curly's cheek. With the shot, Tampico and Stony leaped at him.

Curly flung himself backward. As he did, three rifles spurted flame in the willows. Tampico was dead before he hit the ground. Stony rolled over and lay still. Crescent flung a leg up to get into his saddle. He got no further. In midair something hit him and twisted him around. A scream died in his throat. All the stiffness seemed to go out of his body. Another slug slapped into him, and still another. Eyes glazing, he slipped over the hindquarters of his horse to fall lifeless to the ground.

Blood was streaming from Curly's cheek. Unconscious of it, he stared at Crescent and the other two, his breath coming in gasps. It had happened so suddenly he could think only that Corson and the others had not waited in the sand hills as they had agreed.

Three men stepped out of the brush. Still dazed, Curly turned to face them. For a moment he was helpless in his surprise. He blinked his eyes incredulously, thinking he must be dreaming.

"Bill," he got out huskily, "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me Curly—and Yuma here and Cactus." Little Bill turned Crescent over with his foot. "Took us a long time to catch up with this coyote but we fetched him. If I'd only blazed away a second sooner he wouldn't have marked you, Curly."

Light was beginning to break on Curly. "Bill, you and the boys have been in this country for days, haven't you?"

"We sure have. Old Windy Bill gave us a tip that brought us up here. We've been chased for rustlers three or four times. This is the second time we've been into these springs. Came in again this mornin', just before daylight, when we knew Crescent was headed this-a-way. Never dreamed you was here until you stepped out."

"But you knew I was in this country, didn't you?"

"Yeh, I knew that. I wanted to talk to you but I didn't figger it was safe. You've come a long ways since you quit

us. I wouldn't do anythin' to get you into trouble on our account. What sort of a showdown was Crescent forcin' on you?"

Curly told him briefly. Yuma and Cactus had gone down the canyon.

"Just what I figgered," Little Bill muttered. "You see, Curly, he was a rat, and he couldn't believe that a man could be foolish once and still be a man. But you don't have to worry about that now. You vented your outlaw brand when you pulled away from us, and you've blotted it out completely by what you've done since then."

"I don't know, Bill," Curly muttered glumly.

"Well, I know! The only man who might have testified against you is dead. You're in the clear now." He broke off to examine Curly's wound. "You ought to do somethin' about that cheek," he declared gravely.

"I'll take care of it after you pull out," Curly told him.

Little Bill glanced at him sharply. "Ain't no hurry about that—"

"Yes, there is, Bill. Here comes the boys now; I reckon they'll bear me out."

"Looks like a posse over there to the west," Yuma stated. "They came out of the hills—must be a dozen of 'em—and they're sure streakin' it for here."

Curly told them who the men were. "Well, we will have to be movin'," Bill admitted. "They'll come into the west and we'll go out the other way as they come down off the plateau." He communed with himself a moment and then handed his rifle to Curly. "You better take this gun, Curly. You've saved these men the trouble of stringin' up these gents, but that may not stop 'em from askin' questions, even though it's a shut and closed case of shootin' rustlers in self-defense. You might also kinda take the rifle as a little present from me. You won't find any notches on it, Curly."

Curly took the gun. "I'll take good care of it, Bill."

Little Bill got on his horse. This was a last parting, but as on that evening in the Strip, they did not shake hands.

"So long, Curly," he murmured.

"So long, Bill." Curly raised a hand to Yuma and Cactus.

Corson and the others were not long in arriving. They had heard the shooting and did not know what it portended. Curly turned a blood-smeared face to them as they rode up. To his surprise, he saw that Matt Williamson, the sheriff, was with them.

"What was all that shootin'?" Matt asked. "Sounded as though—"

"Look, Matt, he got the whole three of 'em!" Corson cried.

"Well, so he did!" the sheriff exclaimed as he stared wide-eyed at the bodies on the ground. "They couldn't be any deader if you'd strung 'em up." He turned to Curly and pushed out his hand. "I congratulate you, Curly. I got wind of this party and came a packin', figurin' I had a lynchin' on my hands. But you've made lynchin' absolutely unnecessary. Reckon you were in a pretty tough spot."

"Yeh, I sure was," Curly agreed thoughtfully.

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The Rafter-A Comeback

By Wilton West

JIM MASTERS tied his horse to a hitch-rack, strode across Sagetown's dusty, adobe-lined street, quietly pushed open the sagging screen doors of the false-fronted Paradise Hotel, glanced towards the dining room and heard the voice of the man whom he had been sent to watch.

His gray eyes flickered slightly and his mouth lost the smile it had worn a moment before as, in the street, he had watched a lovely young woman ride past beside a lanky old cow-poke in muchly-worn batwing chaps. Jim had been wondering who the sunny-haired girl was. Her blue eyes had met his for an instant and she had observed him keenly, almost nodding.

He had just completed a hundred-mile ride from Red Rock and was hungry. He crossed the lobby and glanced up at the big clock above the hotel desk. It registered noon exactly. He had made the long ride in a night and half day. Outside, the hot Arizona sun was radiating its heat waves over the desert.

"Room?" he said softly to the clerk behind the desk.

The clerk pivoted the register, read his name and eyed him admiringly. Jim's six-feet-one and wide shoulders packed with muscle under his gray flannel shirt were topped by a bronzed, strong face and smiling gray eyes. The clerk handed him a room key, nodded towards the dining room and spoke whisperingly:

"Buck Hall and his crowd," he said, "and mad as hell at Miss Bennett's sending for a Ranger. They're holding a meeting tonight, down in the Bird Cage."

Jim's eyes flickered again.

"I aims tuh be present, son," he stated softly. "Grub time?"

The clerk nodded towards the dining room again. Jim pulled his holsters a little farther forward on his lean hips and pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

"Get my hoss fed, son, and then leave 'im tied in front."

As he entered the dining room, a half dozen men sitting at a long table suddenly ceased talking and eyed him coldly, then went on eating. At the head of the table sat a big, dark-haired man of unshaven face and surly eyes. He looked at Jim, scowled and lowered his face over his plate.

Jim stepped forward as though to speak to him, a little smile coming into his face, but the man did not look up again. Once more that flicker flashed across Jim's face. He sat down in a vacant chair at the table and reached for the potatoes. A man opposite him lifted the dish, helped himself and passed it along to the others. Jim reached for the meat and the same thing happened, a man beside him passing the platter along the line of men. Not a man glanced at Jim and no one spoke. An amused twinkle came into Jim's cool eyes. All the food was now down at the big man's end.

"Mind passin' back the grub, boys?" Jim asked good-naturedly.

No one answered and not a dish came. Jim rose, sauntered to the big man's end, got the food and served himself, then sat down and started eating. The men rose in a body and headed for the doors.

"Hold it!" A feminine voice cut the air sharply.

Jim looked up. The girl with the sunny hair was standing just inside the doors, booted feet slightly spread and a gun in each hand.

"Go back and sit down, gents!" she ordered crisply. "You all know me, and these guns can start talking fast!" Her hammers clicked back.

The men stalked back and sat down. The girl laughed curtly, stepped a bit closer, looked at Jim, her blue eyes twinkling now.

"Make 'em serve you, Mister!" she suggested. "I'm backing your play." She looked at the big man at the head of the table. "Buck Hall, try anything and you'll be minus *another* ear!"

Jim glanced at the man. The lobe of the left ear was missing. The girl looked back at Jim.

"Go ahead! Make 'em snap out of it."

Jim grinned. He again asked for the bread, but not a man moved.

CRACK. Buck Hall yelled hoarsely and leaped up as his chair crashed under him, one of its rear legs missing, and from the girl's right-hand gun white smoke was curling up.

"He asked for the bread, Buck Hall," she stated.

Buck Hall glared, kicked away the broken chair and reached down towards his gun.

Bang! The gun flipped from his hand and he grabbed his fingers. From an open window behind Jim came a drawling voice:

"I wouldn't, Hall!"

In the open window frame appeared the bronzed, dusty face of the lanky old cowpoke whom Jim had seen riding beside the girl a few moments before, and across the sill rested two black guns. The girl laughed softly.

"Good work, Jake!" she said. "Now, you men, get out!"

The men at the table leaped up and reached for their guns, glaring at the old cowman in the window. Buck Hall went for his other gun.

"Stop!" Jim's voice rang with deadly grimness. His hands now held heavy forty-fives and his gray eyes had become steel-like. "Drop 'em!" he added sharply.

Buck Hall's gun quivered in his hand and his face distorted with fury, but he, with the others, allowed their guns to drop to the table.

"You'd oughta known better, Bill!" Jim said softly as he eyed Buck Hall. "You were always a little slow on the draw." He motioned with one gun toward the doors. "Sashay outside, gents. We'll leave your guns with the clerk, later on."

The men clattered to the lobby doors and stalked out. Buck Hall glared back.

"I'll be seein' yuh later, Jim!" he stated gruffly.

Jim eyed him sternly. "I'm lookin' to you to keep your men's paws off any guns," he said evenly. "Shootin' a man in the back is dirty . . . Bill."

Buck Hall's face reddened, his gaze wav-

ered and he slouched out behind his men. Jim turned to the girl and smiled as he holstered his guns.

"I'm Kit Bennett, of the Rafter-A ranch," she introduced herself, looking at him admiringly; "and you're the Ranger sent here to help me, I'm sure. Been tough sledding for me, all alone. Buck Hall's as mean a man as this valley ever saw, and he's trying to work everybody up against my new dude venture." She smiled towards the old cowman who had clambered through the window and was gathering up the guns on the table. "Jake here has been my only . . . army."

One glance into the old cow-puncher's weather-beaten face and Jim liked him instantly.

"Guess we can work things out all right, Miss Bennett," Jim smiled, admiring the depths in her blue eyes. "Let's sit down and talk things over, while I eat."

They sat down at the table.

"Well . . . let's hear everything. Your packin' dudes intuh this old cow country's got everybody sore, eh?"

"And Buck Hall in particular," she told him. "I was born on our Rafter-A and he was our foreman before father died six months ago. Since then, things started running down—rustled cattle and horses and general neglect. Hall became surly and silent. I got mad and he kept promising to go after the rustlers but he never accomplished a thing. Within a month after Dad's death our Rafter-A was rustled twice, a lot of our cows and some of our best horses, at night. Our remaining cattle have wandered badly. Then Hall suddenly told me he'd bought the Star-Bar ranch about ten miles from here, and he moved over there, taking most of our riders. I've only got old Jake and three young cowboys now—all I can afford to pay, since losing so many of our cattle.

"If all were rounded up, I think I'd have several thousand head still, and my sixty thoroughbred horses which I've been training for sale to the eastern markets. But in actual money I was terribly short when Buck Hall quit and took my riders away with him. From well over six thousand cows I found myself short nearly half. Of course I was suspicious, but a number of personal inspections which I made with old Jake, nights, never showed us a single Rafter-A cow on Hall's Star-Bar, nor any of our stolen horses.

"But Dad's eastern relatives are people of position, and so I started the Rafter-A as a dude ranch. But from the day I began my new adventure, I've been hounded day and night, and Buck Hall is out to wipe us off the entire map."

"And how have you come along?" Jim asked as he finished eating. He eyed her admiringly. "You shore have grit!"

"Our dude ranching has been bully, but Hall's got most of the valley ranchmen down on what we are doing, claiming dudes spoil the range, excite the cattle, ruin horses, shoot game out of season, and all that sort of talk. He's even done more. He's . . ."

"Let's get ridin' down to the Rafter-A, Miss Bennett," Jim broke in as he rose. "We'll talk as we ride."

As they rode out of town, the street was deserted. The Hall crowd seemed to have left. Hardly a hitch-rack had a saddled horse. An odd, relieved light came into Jim's eyes.

THE next morning, Jim drew Monte to a halt on a small ridge and studied the country admiringly. Away to the west the rugged Maricopa Hills towered towards a turquoise sky. A hundred miles eastward rose the Red Rock foothills. Southward appeared the wide range of Buck Hall's Star-Bar. A great arroyo—the Arroyo Seco—eastward, about two miles south, across the mesquite-covered desert, seemingly having been formed by some giant cleaver of ages agone. South of the Arroyo Seco was a short open stretch of rangeland which ended at the blue-tinted Santa Rosa Mountains; and at the base of those hills was Kit Bennett's Rafter-A ranch. He saw a wooden bridge over the Arroyo Seco, the arroyo being the diving line between Buck Hall's rangeland and Kit's; his to the north, hers to the south.

A dirt road went southward from Sagetown and across Hall's range to Kit's Rafter-A, passing over the bridge. A few riders and a couple of wagons were going along the road as Jim watched, while a group of cowboys were driving a small cattle herd just east of the road. Riders, wagons and herd became mere dots as Jim sat on the ridge studying the lay of the land. His eyes hardened as he thought of what Kit had told him on the ride down. She had said that one of her cowboys had been found shot to death, on a night when

some more of her cattle had been stolen; and the next day Hall had ridden over to the Rafter-A and offered her his aid, but winding up with a proposal of marriage!

"He became rough, Jim," Kit had told him, "finding me all alone. He grabbed me in his arms and kissed me and told me I'd either marry him or find myself without a home or a hoof. I fought from his arms and fired at him, and he's been minus the lobe of that ear ever since."

Her eastern relatives had sent her wealthy tourists and, through these, others had come for hunting, camping and fishing. They had paid her well and the Rafter-A had suddenly begun to flourish. Now old Jake and her three remaining riders were drawing double pay and she was building up a very substantial bank account, but Buck Hall's hostility had come out more and more viciously. He had hired a lot of riders on his Star-Bar who seemed to be gunmen, and he and they rode the range domineeringly, sullen, sneering. However, Hall had, by rather large purchases of cattle and horses from the local ranchmen, obtained a strong hold in the valley; and he had succeeded in getting himself elected sheriff

"Then he appointed his gunmen as his deputies," Kit had said. "Since then, our valley has been under his thumb. And now he has refused to allow my tourists to use the road from Sagetown to the Rafter-A, which crosses his range for several miles until it reaches the bridge over Arroyo Seco. He's turned back several of my parties from the East. The road has always been open to everybody, but Hall refuses *me* its use—unless I marry him. So I wrote, asking for a Ranger."

Jim's eyes grew steel-like as he sat with one be-chapped leg around his saddle horn and puffed at his cigarette. That Buck Hall was playing a vicious game down here, and against Kit personally, made his blood boil.

He lifted his reins to ride on when, from around an outcropping cliff, Buck Hall himself came forward, his horse at a walk. As he saw Jim he scowled. The two men eyed each other steadily.

"I been wantin' a talk with you ever since yuh arrived yesterday," Hall stated sullenly. "Looked fer you right after that meetin' o' our cowmen in the Bird Cage last night."

"I left as soon as those ranchmen backed up my statements," Jim replied evenly. "Dude ranches has come intuh this cow country tuh stay. They're all over the West now, and payin' mighty well. It's payin' Miss Bennett right good, and she's needin' the money, after bein' robbed almost dry by some low-down skunks what oughta be hung. You bein' sheriff here, looks like you'd oughta . . ."

Buck Hall's face flushed a dull red. "Accusin' *me* o' bein' in on th' rustlin'?" he broke in. "Yuh been accusin' me of every dirty trick yuh could think up, ever since we was kids."

"And you've been guilty of every one of 'em, as yuh know," Jim replied coldly.

Hall laughed sneeringly. "What yuh down here for, anyway? We heard that that damned Bennett gal wrote for a Ranger; and, of course, *you* had tuh be th' one tuh horn in!"

"I have my orders, Bill," Jim stated coldly. "The chief happened tuh pick me."

"Well, yuh'd oughta told 'im yuh wouldn't come," Hall retorted hotly, "unless yuh've come like a damned, low-down sneak tuh take me back tuh Phoenix an' see me hung, while *you* pulls down them rewards still against me."

JIM eyed him gravely. "Jensen confessed, two months ago," he stated, "before he died—in the pen; said *he* did that killin' over near Maricopa. That let *you* out, Bill, and them rewards have been cancelled. It gives yuh another chance to go straight—if you can."

Buck Hall laughed raucously. "New chance, eh? That's damn good, all right! An' so he ships *you* down here tuh watch me, eh? An' you hornin' in, already, tyin' up with that Bennett filly!"

Jim eyed him steadily. "How'd you get all your cattle and the Star-Bar ranch, Bill?" he asked quietly. "Never knowed you tuh have one twenty-dollar bill at one time before."

"So!" Hall roared. "Jest what I thought! Down here tuh spy on me! You're lousy low-down, Jim, like yuh always was." He jerked his horse away savagely. "Well, th' hell with yuh, an' with her!"

Jim smiled grimly. "That doesn't answer my question. My orders tell me what to do, but you're buckin' more'n me, Bill, if you're playin' dirt again. Miss Bennett's fully within her rights."

Hall rode away at a gallop, his spurs

jabbing viciously. Jim turned towards town. Again he started to ride on, but old Jake came loping up, grinning and holding a gun.

"Seen Buck Hall with yuh, Masters," he stated. "He's shore th' low-downest skunk what ever lived; slick as hell, too. Some day he's gonna swing high an' some han'some, I'll bet."

"Oh, I reckon we'll get things straightened out, Jake, after a little," Jim said quietly. "Reckon we better get back to the ranch."

As they loped along, old Jake eyed him keenly.

"Have yuh knowed 'im somewheres before, Masters?" he asked. "I heerd 'im callin' yuh 'Jim.'"

"Yeah, once, Jake," he stated calmly.

Old Jake laughed softly and holstered his gun. "Chad Moon was watchin' yuh from behind them rocks," he said. "Seen me an' romped away at a run. He was holdin' a gun on yuh while Hall was a-talkin' to yuh."

"And who's Chad Moon?" Jim asked.

"Buck Hall's foreman an' a low-down gunman with notches. Watch 'em both, close."

Jim smiled grimly. "Looks like there's tough times down here, Jake," he remarked.

"They shore is," old Jake grunted grimly. "Rustlin' from our Rafter-A, coupla fellas shot up and one killed at night; and then that big holdup a little while back. Stage, over close tuh Tombstone. Robbed o' 'most forty thousand an' th' driver plugged cold. Buck Hall ain't done a durned thing about it, neither, but brags a heap o' whut he's gonna do. Hell-uv-a-sheriff, he is."

Jim's gaze settled on another cattle herd being driven across Hall's range, a couple of miles to the southward—a herd which Jim estimated was worth well around five thousand dollars. He watched it curiously.

"When did Buck Hall buy the Star-Bar, Jake?" he asked quietly.

"Why, shortly after that holdup. Him an' his deppities went ridin' hell-fer-leather after them bandits, but come rompin' home without a single one. The Star-Bar war bein' auctioned off, tuh satisfy a mortgage, and Hall bought it in; fer eighteen thousand, we hears. He paid cash, on th' dot. He's a smart cowman, all right, but a durned rotten sheriff."

For a long way, the two rode along in silence. Ahead of them lay the Rafter-A. As the buildings came into sight, Jim broke into a faster lope. Noisy, cheerful voices sounded and he smiled amusedly.

"Looks like Miss Kit's got a fresh herd o' them dudes, Jake," he remarked. "Must be funny, handlin' 'em, after cows."

KIT was surrounded by a crowd of newly-arrived tourists as the two men swung from their saddles. He regarded them amusedly.

She had erected about a dozen cabins about a hundred yards from the ranch-house, built garages and additional stables and a dairy, an ice-house and various other buildings. The Rafter-A looked like a small village. In one corral were her sixty thoroughbred horses—sleek, beautiful, playful, clean-cut. Jim joined Kit.

"Jake and my other three riders are training them into gaited saddlers," she told him. "They'll bring sky-high prices, back east, and most of them are sold already, just waiting to be shipped."

"I wonder them rustlers ain't been after 'em long ago," he remarked.

"We keep them always in their corrals," she explained, "and padlocked night and day, with guards." But suddenly she leaned forward and stared at the horses. "Apache Boy's gone!" she exclaimed. "My pet saddler, Jim!" She called old Jake instantly, and he came running. "Apache Boy's gone, Jake!" she exclaimed anxiously.

Old Jake flung a saddle on a fresh horse, shouting to his three young riders.

"We'll find 'im, Miss Kit!" he promised as he mounted. "Come on boys!"

But the men returned as evening came, weary, dusty and discouraged.

"Not a single durned sign, Miss Kit," old Jake admitted.

The tourists were shouting various demands and Kit had to attend to their numerous wants. Night came and saw her tired, but at the first break of dawn she and Jim were in their saddles. About three miles away, along the base of Lonesome Hills, she stopped and pointed down.

"There it is, Jim—Apache Boy's track! Quarter front shoes and bare hind feet, see?" She studied the tracks keenly. "Going at a gallop, too, with other horses, and heading west."

Following the tracks at a fast gallop, they rode down the southern slope of Lonesome Hills, out across the desert, back

again close to the hills, and finally, at the west end of Lonesome Hills, into a great, rugged canyon which rose steeply upward. Once Kit smiled warmly at Jim and rode closer.

"It's . . . wonderful, Jim, having you with me here. I've been afraid to ride over here alone, for fear I'd meet Buck Hall or some of his men, even though this is all on *my* range." Her voice changed into grim eagerness and her blue eyes flashed. "But now we'll sure make 'em high-tail out of here so darned fast they'll think the wind's on fire, darn 'em! This is Medicine Canyon."

"And it's shore nice bein' here . . . with *you*, Miss Kit!" Jim said quietly.

She shot a swift glance into his face and the glow in his eyes brought blushes sweeping into her cheeks. But a sense of security swept her.

The trail up Medicine Canyon had been passed over by quite a herd of cattle and horses. The ground, here and there, was moist. Now and then appeared the tracks of Apache Boy.

"Somebody's certainly driven cows and horses up here," she said. "Wonder who? Nobody ever uses this canyon, so far as I know—too rough and ends in a box canyon. But there's a narrow hill trail up above. It leads back to Sagetown—a short cut."

Suddenly, from ahead, came, from around some bluffs, men's voices, dulled by intervening masses of boulders. Jim and Kit stopped instantly, listening.

"We better take a look, Kit," Jim whispered.

Tying their horses, they slipped cautiously ahead through the high mesquite and around the masses of boulders. Jim suddenly caught Kit's arm and held a finger against his lips. He motioned to her to lie down. Flat behind some thick bushes, they peered ahead. A small valley lay before them, and Buck Hall, with two men, was working over the brand on a hogtied steer! They were heating a branding iron at a small fire close by. Their horses, with dragging reins, grazed near at hand—and among them was Apache Boy!

"Those horses are all ours!" Kit whispered close against Jim's ear, "And that blazed-faced sorrel is Apache Boy. Now we know. . . ." But suddenly she coughed from a swirl of dust.

Buck Hall and his companions leaped up, whirled and jerked out their guns.

JIM led Kit back down the canyon at a run. They reached their horses, flung themselves into their saddles and dashed away. Guns roared behind them and bullets whined past. Jim glanced back as he and Kit rounded a bend in the trail. Hall and his men were standing back there, and their guns rose again, cracked sharply. Jim fired back swiftly, twice, and a man beside Hall sank down. At breakneck speed Jim and Kit raced on through the thorny mesquite, over rocks. And then Kit dashed into a small canyon leading upward.

"The short cut," she told him as they scrambled up.

As they reached the top they heard Hall and his men following, their horses' hoofs clattering loudly. Hall shouted something. Jim looked back again. Hall and another man came into sight, riding upward and gripping their guns. As they saw Jim they fired again. Jim sent back a volley of shots and the two men vanished behind outcroppings of the mountain wall.

Jim and Kit dashed down the opposite slope, their horses sliding dangerously through the shale rock, cut through another little canyon and came out, a few moments later, beside the Arroyo Seco. Water stood ten feet deep in it, but they plunged their horses in, swam across and clambered up the other bank. Then they let their horses out to full speed across the desert, heading for Sagetown, a couple of miles ahead.

As they halted before the Bird Cage, a little later, Jim leaped to the ground, passed his reins to Kit and ran for the little telegraph office close by. A minute later he was back and on his horse again.

"I sent a wire," he explained to Kit. "Let's go!" He jabbed his spurs into Monte's flanks and they raced away southward for the Rafter-A. "We better get home," he said as they raced on. 'Hall's bein' sheriff here might hold us up, on any charge he might make, now that he knows we've caught 'im blotchin' brands. But thing'll shore start hummin' from now on," he added grimly. "I wired Red Rock for more of our men. They oughta be here come mawnin'."

An hour and a half later he and Kit reached the Rafter-A. The new tourists were clamoring for her, wanting to get started on their hunt in the Santa Rose Hills. Old Jake and Kit's young cowboys had everything ready, even to the loaded pack mules.

"Take 'em out, Kit," Jim advised. "And take old Jake along. I'll feel safer about you if he's with you."

He smiled humorously as he eyed the tourists. They had rigged themselves out marvelously. Every sort of conglomerate cowboy rig had been donned. The New Yorkers were shouting happily, wearing guns and carrying Winchesters and shotguns.

"All right, Jim," Kit agreed. "We'll camp down by Squaw Butte, five miles south of here, where we usually stop for the first night. We'll be back, though, about noon tomorrow. I'm too anxious to stay away any longer than that. If anything happens, send one of our boys and we'll come fast. Maybe some of these dudes can shoot a little—make noise, anyway, if the Hall crowd tries anything."

"Maybe, Kit," he replied amusedly. "Never can tell. Grit is where yuh find it. I heard some of these dudes talkin' about bein' over in France. I saw such dudes go through hell over there."

With Kit leading the way, the tourists strung out on their horses, the pack mules trotting alongside with rattling of packs. Old Jake drove them with a long rope and shouts, calling every mule by name. The party disappeared across the desert. Then Jim detailed one of the two Rafter-A cowboys to watch the road leading to Sagetown and sent the other man out to scout around in the direction of Lonesome Hills, explaining to both what they had just been through. Over in their corrals, the thoroughbreds stamped, whinnied, and skylarked playfully.

Jim climbed up on the roof of the ranch-house and studied the country keenly, a Winchester in one hand.

"No tellin' what may happen before my boys get here," he muttered. "But reckon we can hold the fort until then."

He squatted down close to a chimney, laid the rifle across his knees and rolled a cigarette. Often Jim's gaze turned southward, to where Kit's party had disappeared among the hills, and his eyes held a tender light.

"She's shore . . . wonderful!" he murmured. "Game as a man, too."

ON the outjutting east end of Lonesome Hills, at that same moment, screened among the rocks, Buck Hall and a dozen of his Star-Bar ruffians lay watching. As they saw Kit lead the tourists away, Hall smiled and dragged slowly at his heavy moustache. A satisfied light came into his eyes.

"Looks like she ain't left nobody home a-tall, boys," he remarked, " 'cept that one fella ridin' away on his bronc. Takin' packs, too," he added. "Reckon they're campin' out all night." He smirked around at his men. "Our night tuh howl, fellas!"

"Guess we've 'bout cleaned th' Rafter-A out, almost," one man laughed roughly. "Shore been swell pickin's—all of them cows an' broncs. Only one thing yuh ain't got yit, Buck, is th' gal herself, an' she still has them blooded horses."

Hall eyed the speaker amusedly and winked. "Some nice dark night you an' me'll . . ."

The men laughed raucously.

Slowly day turned into flashing sunset, then into moonlit night. Hall rose, hefted his gun-belts and spoke curtly:

"Well, come on, boys! Git yore nags."

They rode down the slope, out onto the flat desert and headed slowly for the Rafter-A. When within a hundred yards of the buildings they stopped, grouped and whispered. And on the roof Jim watched grimly, fingering his Winchester. He called down softly to a dark figure below the roof.

"Jimmy, they're here," he said. "Get over tuh the thoroughbreds and shoot like hell when the ball opens."

The young cowboy, rifle in hand, disappeared among the shadows around the corrals holding the thoroughbreds.

Suddenly Hall's men opened out into three groups and came forward at a run. One group headed for the thoroughbreds' corrals. Another headed for some haystacks beyond, and the third group came directly towards the ranch-house. Hall yelled:

"Git them thoroughbreds pronto, boys! You other fellas fire th' stacks. Th' rest of us'll tackle th' house and git whatever's worth takin'. Work fast!"

Crack! Bang! Bang! Crack!

Jim's Winchester roared again and again, swiftly. Over near the corrals young Jimmy's rifle flamed furiously. A rider near Buck Hall fell from his saddle, and a horse catapulted. Another rider flopped and lay sprawled out in the bright moonlight, as Jim fired again. A cry of pain came from Jimmy's shadows. His rifle roared again and then ceased suddenly.

voices around the corrals shouted hoarsely: then the thoroughbreds dashed out and went flying westward towards Lonesome Hills, driven by a group of riders. Jim fired until his rifle became almost too hot to touch. Then the hay-stacks suddenly flamed. In the glow Jim saw Hall and a group of men coming towards the house. He rose to secure a better view. A shot rang out and he toppled headlong to a small roof below, rolled off and crashed heavily to the ground. And blood started oozing through his shirt, over his shoulder, where one slug had torn the flesh. Another shot cracked out and he felt a flashing streak of heat along his head. He collapsed in a heap.

WHEN Jim came to, he was astride a horse and roped hand and foot to the saddle. Men were riding close and the moonlight had faded somewhat. Hoofs clattered over rocky ground. Jim's head and shoulder were aching miserably, but as Buck Hall's gruff voice sounded up ahead, he looked up.

"Throw a rope around his durned neck, Tod," Hall ordered. "Then cut his wrists an' laigs loose and make 'im ride faster. We're losin' too much time."

Jim felt rough hands jerk away the ropes around his wrists and ankles; felt a noose settle over his neck and jerk taut.

"Try any damn fool trick, fella," a rough voice spoke beside him, "an' I'll shore yank yore haid plumb off."

They rode on, the moon brightened, and Jim saw that they were in Medicine Gulch, where he and Kit had seen Hall and his men blotching that steer's brand. He felt for his guns, but they were gone. He leaned forward to ease himself in his saddle. Instantly the rope about his neck tightened and the man leading him growled something. The man was riding just in front of Jim, for the trail was narrow. Right behind Jim rode another man, silent, dark, on a gray horse. A few minutes passed. Hall, up ahead, said something and the gait increased.

Jim leaned forward again and the rope around his neck slackened. In one swift move he flung it off, whirled about and drove straight at the rider behind. Their horses crashed together. Jim whipped out the gun from the man's holster and sent his horse closer, shoving with all its weight. Outlaw and horse plunged over the trail's edge and shot downward. As the cry of the doomed man pierced the night, Jim was away in a flash, spurs raking hard. He headed the only way which was open—down towards the canyon's entrance. Behind him, men yelled and shots roared. The trail was twisting and Jim reached the desert below in safety, but a bullet had slashed through his big Stetson and another had slightly burned his forearm.

Suddenly Buck Hall's loud voice shouted, well behind:

"Never mind him, boys!" it said. "Let's git these cows an' hosses movin' fast for the border."

Jim pulled to a halt and looked back. Cattle and horses were emerging from Medicine Gulch's entrance now, all moving southward. The Mexican border lay only a few miles away. A quizzical light came into Jim's eyes.

"Looks like Bill's lettin' me get away," he muttered. "First time I ever knowed him tuh be tender-hearted."

His wounds were torture, but he headed for the Rafter-A at a run.

He leaped from his saddle before the Rafter-A, an hour later, to find Kit and the tourists battling the flames noisily but efficiently. The fire had been confined to the hay stacks and was gradually being extinguished. A pall of smoke hovered over the place. Kit came running up and grabbed his arm.

"What happened, Jim?" she cried. "We saw the fire and came fast. Jimmy's been shot through the leg and is inside. We found him beside the corrals and our thoroughbreds all gone. He said he saw you fall from the roof. Then he lost consciousness." Then she saw the blood soaking Jim's shirt and stepped close. Her hands gripped him. "Why—why, Jim, you're . . . wounded!"

Jim straightened grimly. He gazed around at the tourists.

"Hall's gang, Kit," he told her. "They're headin' for the border, right now, with a lot of yore cows and them thoroughbreds. We gotta take a chance with these tourists."

He shouted to the tourists and beckoned to the men members.

"Rustlers, gentlemen!" he told them. "Grab yore broncs an' guns. We're ridin' fast!"

Excitedly, eagerly, the men tourists mounted. Jim told off a dozen or so to accompany him. He swung his horse to-

wards the Lonesome Hills. Old Jake rode up, armed to the teeth.

"Medicine Gulch, Kit!" Jim spoke to Kit sharply. "Stay here and send my men the minute they arrive. Tell 'em to head for the gulch, then towards the border."

He and the tourists raced away. Kit shouted orders.

"Stay here and keep on guard, everybody!" she said. "Some Rangers are coming soon. Send them to us, where Jim said!"

But, as she flung into her saddle, her cowboy whom Jim had sent to scout around Lonesome Hills dashed up, excitedly.

"They 'most got me, Miss Kit," he shouted. "Where's Masters an' Jake?"

"Never mind, George," Kit told him curtly. "Jimmy's hurt and inside. Jim and Jake have gone ofter those rustlers, near Medicine Gulch. You stay here and send the Rangers to us as soon as they arrive—Medicine Gulch and then the border. Tell 'em tuh bust the wind!"

She was away in a flash.

AS Jim and his tourists reached the entrance to Medicine Gulch, Buck Hall and his men came driving cattle and the thoroughbreds southward. Instantly, guns roared and men yelled. The stock, stampeded by the noise, rushed away towards the Rafter-A, the thoroughbreds neighing loudly, led by Apache Boy.

"Some of you fellas go with 'em and drive 'em back home!" Jim ordered. Half a dozen of the tourists raced away after the cows and horses, shouting themselves hoarse and bumping ridiculously in their saddles. The magnificent thoroughbreds had naturally headed for the only home they knew, and the thundering cattle were following.

With Jim leading, the rest of the tourists flung from their saddles, tossed their reins over mesquite bushes and fired wildly at the outlaws. Hall's voice bellowed from the other side of the gulch as he and his men returned the fire furiously.

"Head down fer th' border, boys!" he shouted.

Jim leaped up. "Come on, fellas!" he shouted to the tourists. "And shoot tuh kill! This ain't no play-actin' this time. Yo're all deputized, this minute!"

In a rush they followed him, shooting rapidly. One staggered, groaned and sank down, but shouted for the rest to go on. Jim smiled grimly. The man had grit. A gun almost singed Jim's hair as another shot close beside his head. He grinned around at the man, who was wearing eastern riding tweeds.

"Good work, Mister!" he grinned. "Yuh got one, that time."

His own guns roared and another dark form across the gulch tumbled headlong. And then Jim suddenly tensed and stared in complete astonishment, for Kit was racing up and shouting his name! But the two battling forces had become close, and, out of the dark and dust, Buck Hall flashed up at a run, jerked Kit from her saddle and raced away. Jim followed at headlong speed, gun ready, but he dared not shoot. Reaching Hall's side, he darted an arm about Kit and jerked her onto his own horse. Hall's gun blazed, but the bullet whined over Jim's head. All around them were shouting, shooting tourists and Star-Bar riders, heading southward at a mad run.

Hall suddenly leaned sideways, shoved his gun-muzzle against Jim's horse and fired. The horse dropped, but Jim threw himself aside, with Kit, and landed heavily on the ground. A wild laugh came from Hall, but it was followed by a choking gasp. Jim looked up, still holding Kit close on the ground. A tourist had roped Hall exactly around his throat! The easterner followed what he had seen in the movies. He stopped his horse joltingly, the lariat jerked taut about Hall's throat and whipped him out of his saddle instantly. He struck the ground with a sickening thud. Followed by most of the tourists, the rest of Hall's riders went fleeing southward through the moonlit night, firing back as they rode. Behind them, the dudes sent roaring shots after them, yelling loudly.

Jim staggered up, Kit still in his arms. Beside Hall's form he stopped, then rolled the body over on its back. The head flopped strangely and Jim tried to speak, but only choked. He dropped to one knee beside the body and what sounded like a sob broke from him. Kit, beside him, stared down.

"Why, why, Jim," she exclaimed wonderingly, "what . . ."

Jim rose and stood looking down at Hall's body sadly.

"He . . . was . . . my brother, Kit!" he said hoarsely.

"Your — your . . . *what?*" Kit asked.

Jim nodded. "All my life I've tried tuh keep him straight, but it just . . . couldn't . . . be done."

FROM the east came a group of fast-riding men led by Kit's cowboy George. They slid to halts, leaped down and gripped Jim's hands. Stars gleamed on their shirts.

"We come fast as we could, Jim," they told him.

Jim smiled grimly. "Fine, boys! Get ridin' after them dudes and herd 'em home. They've shore been a dandy lot. Fought like all hell, fancy clothes and all. If any's hurt, get 'em home gentle."

But one of the riders was staring down at Hall's body.

"So Hall's passed out, eh?" he said. "Well, that saves spoilin' a nice, new rope. One o' them fellas yuh shot back at the Rafter-A made a dyin' statement. Him and Hall held up that Tombstone stage and robbed it of that forty thousand in cash. Then Hall bought in that Star-Bar outfit and got hisself elected sheriff, thinkin' he could bull the game down here with his gunmen deppities; and he was out tuh git the Rafter-A, too. That hombre wanted whole hog, all right. He was a right smart guy."

Old Jake had loped up and he listened with wide eyes. Then he chuckled and slapped his greasy chaps.

"So that's how come, eh?" he said. "I allers knowed that hombre'd git his, give 'im time."

Jim's eyes shadowed as they met Kit's, and he straightened. Something in hers made his heart suddenly start jumping.

"Well, boys," he said, "get along after them dudes. Jake, you and one of the boys take Hall's body tuh town. Miss Kit and me's headin' back to Rafter-A."

The men thundered away at a run. Old Jake and another man roped Hall's body to a saddle and headed for town. Then Jim and Kit mounted and rode slowly homeward, side by side, in the moonlight.

Somehow, Kit's hand found his.

"Jim, you've been . . . wonderful," she murmured.

His fingers closed over hers. A little smile came into his bronzed face.

"And now I reckon yore dudes . . . stays," he said.

"But the Rafter-A needs a—a . . . real manager, Jim." Kit's voice was low, and only she knew that her off spur sent her horse against his. "If you'd . . ."

And suddenly his arm was about her, drawing her close.

"Don't know if I can handle dudes, Kit," he smiled, "but they've taught me one thing—grit is where yuh finds it."

"They aren't a bit hard to manage, Jim," she smiled, "and . . . they've brought us . . . together!" Was ever a man so hard to make understand? Her heart was pounding, and her lips close.

"Then thank Gawd for dudes, Kit," he murmured. "We'll forgive 'em the way they wears their clothes, for they've brung us . . ." His head bent over hers, and his hand lifted her chin.

"Love, Jim!" she murmured.

REAL WESTERN

NEXT ISSUE, APRIL, ON SALE FEBRUARY 1st

FEATURING: **WILL JENKIN'S** LATEST NOVEL

75,000 Words of Lightning Western Action

Also WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE and Others—

AN ALL STAR ISSUE

The Ranch Mail Pouch

Our RANCH MAIL POUCH is open to all readers of REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE. Here, we can all get together and, as pals should, exchange friendly greetings through all the world. Just write in, addressing THE MAIL POUCH, Room 204, 165 Franklin St., New York City. We'll print your letter and if you don't want your address in, send it confidential to us and we will forward answers to you. Above all, tell us what you think of the stories in REAL WESTERN and what you want to read in these pages.
Come on, trail riders, let's hear from you in time to make the next mail pouch.

FOREMAN "JIM."

Dear Foreman Jim:

Stand aside a second and let a Welsh boy have his say.

I am 5 ft. 9 in., weigh 159 lbs., have dark hair, blue eyes, age 19 years. Horse riding is my favorite sport. I live in a very big town, but being away from home find myself very lonely, but would be very happy if I can get some Pen Pals. Would be willing to exchange postcards of any description. I never stay in one place, but am always on the move. At present I am bricklaying; been at it for six years.

So come all ye girls and boys and brighten a heart up.

E. WILLIAMS.

339 Station Road,
Yardley, Birmingham, England.

Hello, Foreman Jim:

This is England calling! and here is one of its most lonesome critters, who craves to crash your party.

I've read a good many Westerns but REAL WESTERN *sure sits right-a-top o' the world.*

I've travelled lots and have got itchy feet; always I hope to travel more.

I guess help me get some Pen Pals, Jim, who don't mind writing to a widow nearing 40 years.

BETTY BROWNE.

59 St. Hilda Street,
Bridlington, England.

Dear Foreman Jim:

I read your magazine and enjoyed it very much. I am writing in to see if you can get me some Pen Pals.

I am a soldier in India. Am 5 ft. 8 in. tall, have brown hair, and brown eyes, and weigh 142 lbs. I am 19 years old.

See what you can do, Jim, in getting me some friends.

ZEPE McCANN.

A Co., 2nd Batt., H. L. I.,
Roberts Bks., Peshawar, N. W. F., India.

Dear Jim:

I just finished reading REAL WESTERN *and greatly enjoyed it.*

I am 20 years of age, 6 ft. tall, medium blond hair, blue eyes, and weigh 160 lbs. I dance, swim a great deal, and play all outdoor sports, love horse riding and motorcycling.

The Taj Mahal is just one of the many interesting places around here. Whoever sends a photo with the first letter, I will reply with same. Blonds preferred.

ROY.

Dear Jim:

I am a reader of your magazine and enjoy it very much.

I wonder if any of your fair readers would like to correspond with a lonesome man out in the Far East.

I am 22 years old, hair light brown, eyes brown, 5 ft. 9 in. in height, weight 155 lbs. Have many experiences to tell and enjoy writing letters. I like swimming, riding, shooting.

TROOPER SAMUEL BOSE.
3rd Troop, A Squadron, 1st Royal Dragoons,
Gillispie Barracks, Meerut U. P. India.

Dear Jim:

Will you please put this plea for Pen Pals in the mail pouch for me?

I'd certainly like to receive lots of cheerful letters from boys and girls.

I am 18 yrs. old, have black curly hair and blue eyes. Am 5 ft. 8 in. in height. Am fond of dancing, basketball and swimming.

I've felt lonely ever since I graduated from high school, as some of my friends went to college, and others are working. So come on everyone, get busy and write to:

EVELYN D'ANGELO.

1116 Federal St.,
Lebanon, Pa.

Dear Jim:

I have been reading REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *for some time and certainly like the stories, especially one by Charles Alden Seltzer a couple of months back. Could you find me some Pen Pals, please? I am 20 years old, have blue eyes, brown hair, tall and slim. Interested in sports, reading, tobies etc. I live on the south coast of N. S. Wales, and would like to get lots of letters from boys and girls from everywhere. Here's wishing your magazine every success.*

Sincerely yours,

MISS HAZEL BOYD.

34 Midgley Street,
Corrimal, N. S. Wales, Australia.

Dear Jim:

Here's my plea; I live in a small cattle town and am very lonely. Won't some of the readers throw me a line?

I am a young brunette, with black eyes, 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weigh 106 lbs. Come on, everybody, and the first six who write, enclosing snapshots of themselves, will get by return mail a picture of,

Yours truly,

MISS RAY McCAMMON.

Box 54,
Georgetown, Idaho.

Dear Jim:

I'm a young man nearly 22 years old, have black hair, blue eyes, weigh 198, and am six feet tall. I'm fond of all kinds of sports, mostly football, track, and swimming. I will be watching for my letter in the pages of your REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE.

RAY KING.

919 Linden Ave.,
Little Rock, Arkansas.

Dear Jim:

I got acquainted with the REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *and I find it very exciting and thrilling. I am anxious to hear from Pen Pals everywhere. My age is sixteen, I'm 5 ft. and 3 inches in height and weigh 115 lbs. I have golden blonde hair, green eyes and a slim figure. All sports and collecting articles and stamps are my hobbies. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps*

So come on boys and girls drop me a line.

Yours respectfully,
MARGERY KOVAL

5128 S. Hoyne Ave.,
Chicago, Ill

Dear Friend Jim:

I was always under the impression that western stories were all alike, but since reading the REAL WESTERN *all I can say is that I hope such stories as Mule Savvy and Evil Spirit are printed oftener I also read the letters in your Ranch Mail Pouch.*

So I'm appealing to you Foreman Jim to ask our Pen Pals to write to me

I am 5 ft. 6 tall, quite husky, brown hair and eyes, I find New York very lonely. I have plenty of ink, just stocked up on writing paper So c'mon Pen Pals write to a girl with The Big City Blues.

Lonesome Girl of Brooklyn, N. Y.
c/o Mail Pouch

Dear Jim:

I am writing to tell you that I am a constant reader of the REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE. *And I think that this magazine has wonderful stories in it, and above all I enjoy reading the Pen Pal letters of "The Ranch Mail Pouch," because they are interesting.*

Jim I would like to have some REAL WESTERN *Pen Pals or Pen Pals from anywhere in the world, I like to write letters, so I promise to answer all letters that I receive.*

I am a West Virginian, and I would tell all I know about my home town and state. I am a girl of 19½ yrs. old. I am 5 ft. 5 in. tall, blue eyes and medium brown hair.

Well, Jim, I have introduced myself enough right now.

I'll wait for letters, and I hope I get letters from afar as well as near.

Very truly yours,
MISS FLORA WISE.

415 Simpson Avenue,
Clarksburg, W. Va.

Dear Jim:

I have just finished my first copy of REAL WESTERN *and it's the best ever. I discovered the Ranch Mail Pouch at the end and after reading it I decided I wanted a few pen pals myself. I am six feet tall, weigh one eighty, light hair, blue eyes and I am twenty years old. I am a soldier in the U. S. Army in Panama and I can tell many interesting things about the canal and the Republic of Panama.*

My favorite hobbies are sleeping and writing, so come on all you fair lassies and write to this lonesome soldier boy. I promise a photo to every one who writes

P.F.C. CURTIS O'DONNELL.

Battery A, 2nd F.A.,
Fort Clayton, Canal Zone.

Foreman Jim:

I am a constant reader of the REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE. *I can hardly wait for the issues to come, and don't know what I would do if I had to miss one, as reading your magazine is one pleasure I can't miss out on I think your Ranch Mail Pouch is a wonderful idea in bringing people throughout different parts of the world together through correspondence and would like very much to get in on it myself.*

I am a girl of seventeen years have blond hair blue eyes am 5 ft tall and weigh 118 I can't say as I'm awesome but I love to write letters and would sure love to hear from all parts of the world anybody from anywhere will be sure of a speedy reply Will exchange snapshots and do my best to make my letters interesting Hope to receive bushels of letters

MARIE GRAMBS.

29 Judson Street,
Binghamton, New York

Dear Jim:

Won't you please find some Pen Pals for a Japanese girl, five feet one inch tall, hundred and eight pounds, who works in a pineapple cannery in a little town on the island of Kauai? I'd love to exchange snapshots together with Hawaiian and Japanese souvenirs, and anyone who writes to me, may be assured of a prompt reply

Horseback riding, hiking, swimming, and reading such keen magazines as REAL WESTERN *are greatly enjoyed. I won't disappoint anyone, and everyone is welcome to write.*

BESSIE ITO

P. O. Box 119
Kapaa, Kauai, T. H.

Foreman Jim,

I want to let you know just how much I enjoy your great magazine, REAL WESTERN, *and also "The Mail Pouch."*

I would like to get this letter in your old Mail Pouch if I could. I am a young man of 22 yrs. Have brown hair and eyes. My weight is 6 times my age. I like most all sports. Would like you to print this letter so I can get myself some Pen Pals Will write to all, from far and near.

Adios
ERNIE MOORE

Box 45, Route 2,
Liberty, Mo

Dear Foreman:

May I be the first New Zealander to come into the Ranch Mail Pouch

I would like pen friends in all parts of the world interested in stamp collecting, but I would be prepared to correspond on any subject and answer any questions about New Zealand

I am 24 yrs. of age.

If you want any comments about your magazine, I'm not going to make them, because I do not want to put you to the expense of buying a new hat, on account of getting a swelled head

Well here's hoping to get a box-full of mail.

Yours faithfully,
JACK RODGERS

c/o G. P. O. Box 634,
Christchurch New Zealand

Dear Jim

I would be very much obliged to you if you will secure for me a pen pal in New Mexico or Arizona

He must be a real cowpuncher and interested in anything. Wishing you the best of hope and hoping that you will print this scribble. I have been a reader of REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *for over three years and still hope to read it for another three*

Yours truly,
BRIAN V. BOYLE.

"St. Anne's," 8 Duncreggan Road,
Londonderry, Ireland

Dear Jim:

Last nite I bought my first copy of REAL WESTERN *and I think it's the finest western story magazine on the market.*

Keep up those 75 000 word novels.

I've only one complaint to make, and that is, that REAL WESTERN *should be published twice a month instead of once*

Now I wonder if there aren't some folks ranging from 35 to 45 who would like to converse via the letter route with an old bachelor of 40, who hasn't anything else to do but eat, sleep, read, and write letters.

So all you pals, and all youse gallopers who feel the urge of killing a lot of idle time, by tossing ink around just loosen up that old educated ink stick, and get busy.

And if my old sidekicks, Ridgerunner Ezra Jones and Spaghetti Lem Wasta see this, please write

And you, Foreman Jim, if you want to do us all a big favor, just get busy and slip an extra edition of REAL WESTERN *onto the market once in a while*

L. D. SWISHER,
625 South Monroe St.,
Clinton, Illinois

Dear Jim:

I'm a regular reader of your keen magazine and would like your help in chasing away the blues. In other words I want a whole lot of pen pals. Sabe?

I am 5 ft 5½ and we oh around 126 My hair and eyes are dark and my ha is wavy

I love swimming and tennis and above all horseback riding I have a pony of my own

Oh yes! I am seventeen and am a junior in high school Please Jim will you print this? I'll be looking for lots of letters and I promise to answer every one And every one that sends me a snap I'll return one of myself I'm not so-o-o hard to look at.

DOROTHY DECPSER

Abbyville, Kans

Dear Jim:

Surely somewhere in your vast crowd of readers are some prospective pen pals.

I'm single, am some dark hair and eyes and I'm in my twenties and ranches and ranches to spend just wrung—Are you game? especially you fellas. CALIFULNIA DORIS

Dear Jim:

Will you please publish my name in the "Mail Pouch" of REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE

I am a boy, twenty years of age. I have brown eyes and brown hair, I am interested in all sports, especially swimming

I would like to hear from people around my age or in their teens. MICHAEL MATWY.
7 John St
Carteret, New Jersey.

Dear Jim:

Would you please put my plea for pen pals in the pen pal department just as soon as you can?

I am a young man, eighteen years of age, with brown hair and blue eyes. I weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds, and I am five feet, six inches in height.

I will answer all letters, and will exchange pictures with anyone who will be interested

Hoping to see my plea for pen pals in the Mail Pouch soon. LAWRENCE MERRY.
102 So. 27th St.,
Billings, Mont.

Dear Foreman Jim:

I am going to read REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *every month from now on! Why? Because I found a story, "Ridin' Hate," by Charles Alden Seltzer in the March number that really suited my taste in Westerns. Gee, it was a corker! Where's there's one there will be others, so "more power to your Mag!"*

I've never noticed a letter from Maine in the Mail Pouch. But I assure you we do have mail boxes here. And in this little coast town where my particular mail box is situated, where it's kind of lonely and there's not much to do, it's quite an adventure to get the daily mail.

So print my letter, won't you, Jim, so some of the Western Pen Pals and I can bring the East and the West a little closer through correspondence.

I'm twenty-five years old have brown hair and eyes, am five feet, five inches tall and weigh 140 pounds. I live on a farm.

Will be glad to hear from anyone and everyone who may be interested in the above "gal."
VERNA YOUNG.
R F D. No. 1.
West Lubec, Maine.

Dear Jim

I bought my first copy of your magazine here in Honolulu and I've been reading it ever since. A couple of my pals are reading it too, and we're just two. There are three of us together. We would like to correspond with people from 20 to 30. All of us are fond of sports, and will answer every letter sent to us and will exchange snapshots of Honolulu and all of us like to write.

Thanking you,
Italian, Age 20. FRANK DE PALMA.
Irish, Age 30, GEORGE MCKELNEY.
German, Age 23, REINHARDT JACOBS.

Dear Foreman Jim,

I think REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *is the best magazine I have ever heard and read of and incidentally I have been at Radio so much that I need a change and* REAL WESTERN MAGAZINE *is providing that type of interesting change that is needed. I have a National AC SW3 short wave receiver plus a homemade 27 transformer coupled into a horn speaker which works out well for code stations. At the present time I have the [illegible] district being around Texas, Louisiana and Oklahoma which is or ought to be near some of you cowboys. Incidentally if any radio amateurs in that vicinity read this letter I would enjoy writing to them but if they please they can either write some dope on a card or else a letter and it will be immediately answered. My interests are short wave and amateur radio, Journalism, and pets*

I am 18 and 5' 11" tall with brown hair and eyes, and weigh about 145 pounds. Hurry up young or old future pen pals and write and the first week after this mag. is out I hope one of Jim Farley's blue uniformed representatives will have my [illegible]
BILL "TAILSPIN" MATCHETT.
81 Bissell Street,
South Manchester, Conn.

Dear Jim:

My eyes are brown; so is my hair. My weight is 100 lbs., my height, five feet, three inches. My hobby is [illegible]. My interests are between [illegible]. My travels have not been especially extensive but have been numerous and eventful. I should like to tell of mine and hear of others. I have a stack of snapshots waiting as well as stamps to trade. Step right up lads and gentlemen of ages from sixteen to ninety. Will answer every letter I receive. I'll bet you'll like me.
JUNE MINTURN.
8731 Van Brunt Blvd.,
Kansas City, Mo.

Dear Foreman Jim:

I am a young widow of 24. I am very anxious to meet both men and women in all parts of the world.

I have been very lonesome since my husband's death, it was quite a blow to me, having me and [illegible] me like

I am 5' 3" and weigh 116 lbs. and have platinum blond hair I'll send my photograph to all who write.

Dear Bill, please get me a lot of pals. I sit home all alone with absolutely nothing to do. I promise to answer all letters.
JUDY KAY.
403 New Lots Ave.,
Brooklyn, New York

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF MARCH 3, 1933

Of Real Western Magazine, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for Oct. 1, 1935

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared L. Meisel, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Real Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1 That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Winford Publications, Inc., 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C. Editor, Cliff Campbell, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C. Managing Editor, Cliff Campbell, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C. Business Manager, L. Meisel, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Winford Publications, Inc., 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C. Harry Hunter, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C. L. Meisel, 165 Franklin St., N. Y. C.

3 That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4 That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5 That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the six months preceding the date shown above is: [illegible] (This information is required from daily publications only.) L MEISEL, Business Manager

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of October, 1935.

[SEAL] MAURICE COYNE.

Notary Public Bronx Co. No. 95, Reg. No. 49-C-36 Cert. filed in N Y Co. No. 246 Reg. No. 6 C 147 Cert. filed in Kings Co. No. 130, Reg. No. 6207

(My commission expires March 30, 1936)

THE TRADING POST

Here is where the readers of REAL WESTERN can exchange something they have, but do not want, for something that someone else may have and that you may want.
This is a free service, but your announcement must not exceed 38 words. It must be understood that REAL WESTERN is not responsible for losses sustained.
Print your announcement clearly. Nothing but bona fide "swaps" will be inserted. No sales.
Enclose clipping of this announcement with your "swap."

Swap firearms, typewriter, auto parts, cactus soap formula, coil for Ford A for typewriter, gas engine, mechanic tools, etc. What have you? Write. B. Liehr, Macomb, Illinois.

Have violin, electric paint outfit, drill, ¼ h p. motor, Heddon reel, eliminators, speakers, radio parts, etc. Want auto radio, hot water heater or? Jack Kelly, 3471 E. 102 St., Cleveland, Ohio.

Have [illegible] for casting artificial marble, making rigid, flexible and genuine rubber molds. Will swap for what have you? R. W. Miller, 277 E. McFarlane Drive, Ventura, California

Will swap foreign stamps and U. S. postmarks with collectors. Send 25 of either, receive same amount by return mail. Richard Byrnes, 517 W. Arch St., Pottsville, Penna.

Exchange match box labels or book match covers or postcards or postmarks or stamps for street car transfers. Mark H. Zender, Topanga, California.

Have gold bond pen-pencil set, men's diamond tie pin, mounted prairie hawk, gray squirrel, taxidermy course. Want .25 or .32 automatic, jeweled wrist watch, portable typewriter. Donald Hamilton, East Liberty, Ohio.

Will trade a set of beautiful colored birds cards for every Liberty head nickel that is sent me, dated 1900 if possible. Charles E. Russell, 1006 East 5th Street, Coffeyville, Kansas.

Have Colts automatic .38 as new, genuine German Luger .30, brand new, Stradivarius violin, guitar. Want high power rifle or repeating shotgun. C. Moore, 211 East 108 St., Los Angeles, Californ

Have radio parts, books, magazines of all kinds, will trade for almost anything. Also have four-tube A.C. radio to trade. All letters answered. Finlay Howard, Box 734, Harlan, Kentucky.

Have radio parts, 35/30 Savage repeater, .22 Stevens single, and guitar course. Wants high-power deer rifle, flower plants and bulbs, evergreen [illegible] ubs, binoculars, or what? Frank Sko- [illegible] Sayre St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Have [illegible] corrected Remington typewriter, flashlight, fountain pen [illegible] heads, pipes or boat stones. Leon Tatum, Carters, Ga., R. 1

Trade guitar for other musical instrument or camera. Also exchange song words. Send list. Lucille Oller, Strawn, Illinois

[illegible], baseball shoes which are new, [illegible] film developing outfit, and all kinds of magazines. What have you? Henry Roggenbuck, Nassau, N. Y.

Will swap Pathex movie camera and projector for film developer and printing outfit, or what [illegible] Ted Janusz Box 733, Wilwaukee, Wis.

Have complete electrical tattooing outfit, designs stencils, colors etc. Want D. B. 16 hammerless, radio, or make offer. All reasonable offers considered. H. Linna, 729 Snow St., Negaunee, Mich.

[illegible] nes, odd ammunition, climbing spurs, 29x4.40 tires and many other things to trade for most anything. Send list for mine. James R. May, Greensboro, Penna.

(*Continued on page 120*)

Don't Miss January
COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL MAGAZINE
REX BEACH
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE
HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO
AND OTHERS
Also take a try at the interesting PEN-PALS DEPARTMENT—Lots of Fun!!
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The symptoms of this skin disease are inflammation and reddish, dry flat papules or patches, covered with silvery scales and crusts. Send 10c for trial tin of Dermatin No. 1 and No. 2, and you'll see why thousands of psoriasis sufferers "rave" about this discovery. In 98% of ad cases, doctors have found Dermatin No. 1 and No. 2 successful. Dept. 127, VALLEY LABORATORIES, Spring Valley, N.Y.

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SEEJAY SERVICE, 2459 Station St., Chicago, Ill.

Have 46 National Geographic 1926 to June 1930. Want atla 1930 census figure or Rand McNa of each State, indexed. T. O. Palmer, Rush Springs, Oklahoma.

Have 5-tube bat. set and 1 and 3-tube a.w. bat. sets. Will trade for what? Send your list. Kenneth Peterson, 482 6th St., S. F. Calif.

Kodak finishing and enlargements for what have you? Mail your list of articles, number and size of pictures wanted. Satisfaction guaranteed. Terrell Nichols, Bowie, Texas.

Trade 1933 Scott's U. S. specialized catalog in good condition for best offer in U. S. postage stamps. Want correspondence with "Electric Eye" stamp collectors. Ray Toy, O'Neill, Nebr.

Have cloth bound fiction and U. S. stamps. Want U S stamps prior to 1900. Swap 100 different U. S. for 100 different Canadian. Robert D Layne 19 Prospect Park South West, Brooklyn N Y

Want guns, musical instruments, boxing gloves, etc. Have musical instruments, etc. D. H. Hunter, Fyffe, Alabama, R No. 1.

Will trade late issues of popular magazines for unusual stamps. No junk accepted. Will trade for any other useful articles. What have you? J. B. Trapp, 1223 East Lewis St., Wichita, Kan.

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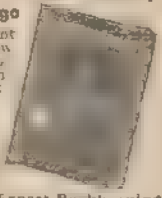

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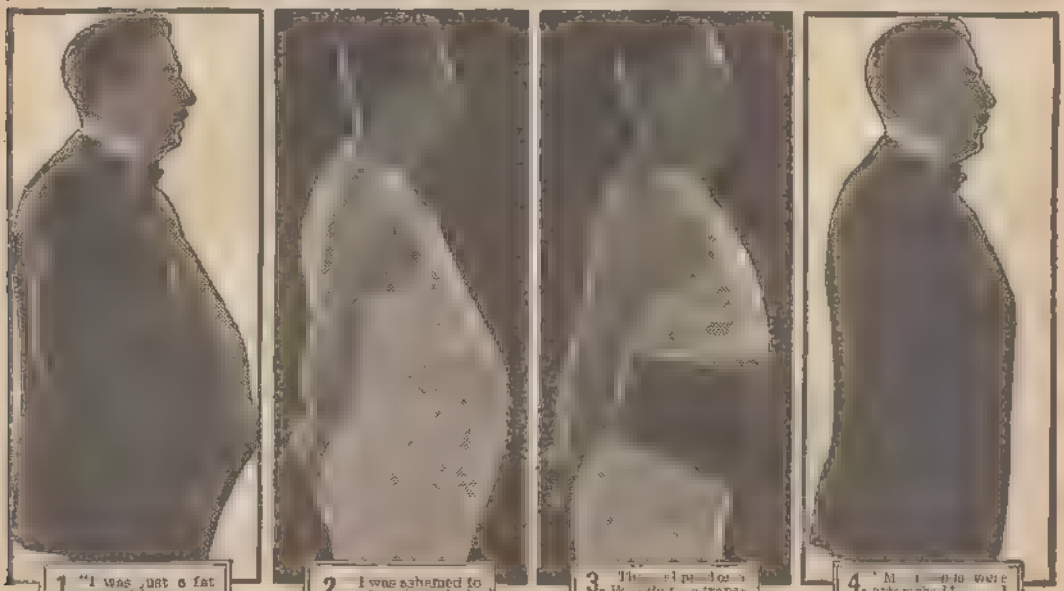

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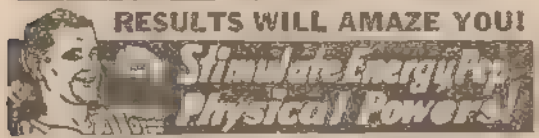

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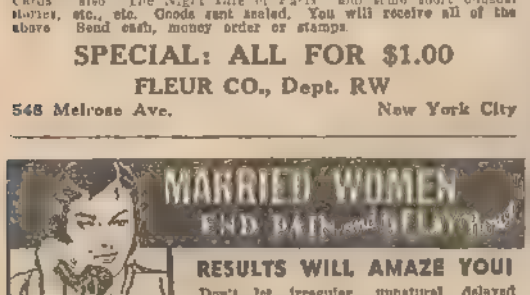

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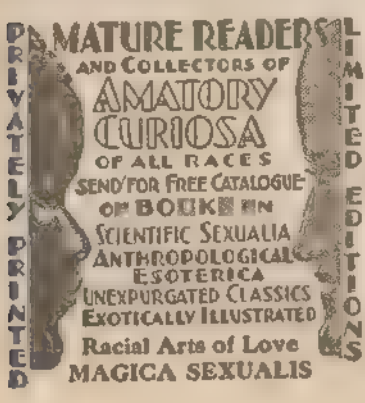

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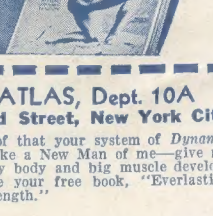

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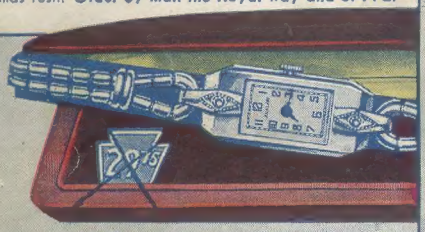

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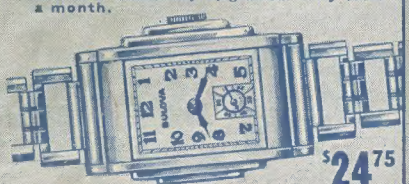

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